

Afro-metropolis

BLACK POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS IN INTERWAR LONDON

DURING THE EARLY DECADES of the twentieth century, the black population in London consisted largely of black workers and a much smaller number of black professionals and artists born in Britain and the colonies; colonial students from Africa and the Caribbean; and African American entertainers and intellectuals passing through and sometimes settling in the city.¹ From the mid-nineteenth century, a steady stream of university students from South and West Africa and the Caribbean entered Britain, most to pursue degrees in law or medicine. African rulers and the mission-educated African elite, especially in coastal towns like Freetown, Lagos, and Accra, sent their children to British schools and universities, as did their counterparts in the Caribbean. Island scholarships brought a handful more each year. Although most returned home after completing their studies, others remained and formed some of the earliest black pressure groups in Britain, such as the short-lived African Association.²

The First World War brought significantly larger numbers of Afro-Caribbeans and Africans to the metropole as both laborers and military personnel. After the war, despite growing antipathy to their presence, some stayed in Britain, leading to new organizing efforts. Still, the censuses of 1911, 1921, and 1931 indicate that the total number of Africans and Caribbeans in Britain remained less than 14,000, though these figures included Caribbean-born whites and excluded the British-born black population.³ A series of “race riots” in 1919 targeted non-European and mixed-race working-class communities in the seaside and riverside districts of London, Liverpool, Cardiff, South Shields, and Glasgow. The government’s response in the form of the Coloured and Alien Seaman Order of 1925 and the Special Certificate of Nationality and Identity of 1932 effectively institutionalized a color bar in

the British shipping industry. African seamen found themselves stranded in Britain and, like their British-born black counterparts, unable to find work.⁴ By the late 1920s, the communist-affiliated Negro Welfare Association and the Colonial Seamen's Association ministered to the needs of black workers.

There was a simultaneous rise in the numbers of Afro-Caribbean and West African university students, the vast majority of whom were men, in Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge, and especially London during the interwar years. A mix of British- and Caribbean-born professionals created the African Progress Union (APU) and Society of Peoples of African Origin near the war's end, and growing numbers of Caribbean and especially West African students joined the Union of Students of African Descent (USAD) in the early 1920s. Avowedly apolitical, as the *African Times and Orient Review* reported, the USAD sought to bring "together all Africans in statu pupillaris resident in England," to keep "African students in London in a condition of active intellectuality" and to encourage the study of "African history and sociology." The APU participated in the Pan-African Congresses of 1921 and 1923. The USAD sent delegates to the latter as well, invited W. E. B. Du Bois to address its members, and became more outspoken by the mid-1920s in denouncing racism in the metropole. Although their activities focused primarily on student sojourners and educated elites, these groups provided important models for more ambitious and enduring projects.⁵

In the 1920s and 1930s, as Britain consolidated its grip on West Africa and amid mounting protest in the Caribbean and the ongoing disposition of the local population at the hands of white settlers and businesses in South and East Africa, London became an important locus of black resistance to racism and empire, a place where transatlantic and imperial networks of people, information, ideas, and cultural forms overlapped and converged. Life in the imperial metropolis had a transformative effect on many African and Caribbean sojourners, and they, in turn, altered the city's cultural landscape and the tenor and substance of resistance to empire. Black intellectuals established new organizations and publications to pressure the imperial state and to engage with British and imperial publics, academicians, and people of African descent around the Atlantic. These institutions became beachheads for a growing black presence, first stops for newcomers and visitors to the city, and generated dreams of pan-African solidarity.

The West African Students Union and League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) emerged among a variety of transimperial, internationalist movements

taking pan-ethnic, feminist, pacifist, communist, socialist, and liberal forms, and the unique sight lines, new opportunities, and obstinate difficulties of the imperial metropolis shaped their black internationalism. A growing interest in black unity on both sides of the Atlantic and new expressions of resistance in the colonies informed the political aspirations of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans who increasingly viewed themselves as representatives of a renascent Africa and global black community. Their political visions and the audiences they addressed expanded as they came into contact with others of African descent and various currents of internationalist and anticolonial thought in London. Building on early organizing efforts among people of African descent in the city and the colonies, these organizations provided an institutional basis for a sustained engagement with and onslaught against the imperial state. They alternately exploited and circumvented the networks of empire to connect black intellectuals around the Atlantic, sympathetic groups in Britain, and burgeoning anticolonial movements. From their position at the heart of the British Empire, the WASU and LCP functioned as relay points, linking protests, disseminating news and ideas, and organizing political action. Ever-present tensions within and among groups and individuals threatened practical unity and the larger political projects that it represented; alliances were formed, renegotiated, and abandoned as each passing crisis or issue presented new openings and challenges. Nevertheless, black sociality, critical debate, and the accretion of even fleeting moments of cooperation led many to identify with an extranational conception of blackness and encouraged regional ambitions in the form of a West Indies Federation and United West Africa.

WEST AFRICA IN LONDON

Andrea Levy's award-winning novel *Small Island* (2004) opens with an English female narrator's memory from her childhood. "I thought I'd been to Africa. Told all my class I had. Early Bird, our teacher, stood me in front of the British flag. . . . And I stood there as bold as brass and said, 'I went to Africa when it came to Wembley.'" The teacher admonished her pupil: "You're not usually a silly girl, Queenie Buxton . . . but you did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition, as thousands of others did." Twenty-six million people visited the British Empire Exhibition in the north London suburb of Wembley, "the largest of Britain's great impe-

rial pleasure parks,” during 1924–1925, and the West Africa pavilion was one of its popular attractions, according to estimates, drawing as much as 60 percent of all visitors. Queenie’s error was the mistake of a young child, but eminent imperialists also marveled at the exhibition’s technological grandeur and verisimilitude. According to the governor of Nigeria, Hugh Clifford, Rudyard Kipling declared after touring the exhibition grounds: “It’s the biggest thing man ever set to hand, in design and in a certain grandiosity. . . . The West Africa building is full of spirit. One almost smells the nigger passing by.”⁶ “Africa” was an object of the popular and political imagination designating a whole field of competing representations, and the staging of West Africa at Wembley “demonstrated that the city and colony were intertwined spectacles.” As Paul Landau observes, “There were two interfaces for Westerners’ contacts with Africans during the colonial era. The first was actual: trading, working, having sex, sharing a joke or a beer; policing, killing, and negotiating; requesting, releasing or denying consents and licenses, paying taxes; prevaricating, appealing, judging, and so on. The second was virtual: the paper-thin barrier composed of photographs, words on stationery, and images projected onto screens. Both interfaces supported a kind of two-way traffic.” For Africans in London, Wembley demonstrated the ways in which the virtual undergirded and sustained actual relations between Britain and West Africa.⁷

The activism of black intellectuals in interwar London often centered on representation in both the semiotic and political senses of the term, and the exhibition sparked renewed attempts at organizing West Africans in London across colonial divisions. In the months leading up to and during the exhibition, Felix Oladipo (Ladipo) Solanke, a Nigerian law student from Abeokuta and a member of the USAD, gained notoriety for a series of letters published in *West Africa* criticizing racist and often salacious depictions of Africans. In “An Outrage,” Solanke condemned a recent article in the *Evening News* under the headline “Cannibalism.” The latter quoted a lengthy footnote from a report titled “Empire Making in Nigeria” by Governor Clifford in which he claimed that British rule eliminated the “cannibalism, slave-trading, obscure black-magic rites . . . that uncounted centuries of barbarism had bred.” Solanke charged that both the article and the governor’s remarks were “calculated not only grossly to mislead the British public, but to do serious harm to those of us from Nigeria who are now in London for educational purposes.” His criticisms linked the racism of average Britons to official complicity in propagating the image of a savage precolonial Africa redeemed by

British colonialism, casting doubt on the espoused intention of the upcoming exhibition, “which no doubt will be visited by many Nigerians who may be looked upon as cannibals by the British public.”⁸ For many like Solanke, who felt daily the effects of British ignorance, such pronouncements belied the inclusive rhetoric around Wembley. As he noted, the danger was precisely that most Britons would believe they experienced the real Africa there.

The exhibition’s organizers envisioned it as a tribute to the dominions’ and colonies’ contributions to the war effort and as a means of restoring “public faith in the direction of progress damaged by the war.” After the imperial conference of 1923 and the defeat of imperial trade preferences in that year’s elections, they hoped it would stimulate investment in the colonies and British consumers’ interest in empire products. The meticulously crafted displays at the exhibition reflected the liberal internationalist ethos of the postwar years, as well as the lessons of wartime experience regarding the importance of imperial coordination and colonial resources. The exhibition handbook heralded the promise of “empire strengthening,” “empire consolidation,” and “empire development” based on the application of modern science and new communication and transport technologies. Colonial participation was the largest ever for a British exhibition, and in return, organizers promised (and spent enormous sums of money) to offer something more than the same racial stereotypes that had characterized previous imperial spectacles, advertising the event as “a family party, to which every part of the Empire is invited, and at which every part of the Empire is represented.” Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and the Gold Coast contributed sums in excess of what the British government requested, funds raised through taxation on imports and exports. Record numbers of West Africans traveled to London for the occasion. Roughly sixty Hausa, Yorùbá, Mendi, Asante, and Fanti speakers worked and lived in the “native village” and “native workshop,” and many more African dignitaries, planters, and members of the British-educated commercial and professional elite made the journey.

“Princess” Akosua Baa, a member of the Asante royal family who brought a Golden Stool from the community’s women to Queen Mary as a wedding gift, “became one of the sensations of the exhibition.” The anthropologist Robert Sutherland Rattray, recognized as the foremost authority on the Asante in Britain, introduced her to the press, noting in an interview that she carried a special charm “because she hoped it will bring a little one.” His *Manual of the Gold Coast*, which was distributed to visitors at the Gold Coast pavilion and which described in detail the practice of “wife purchasing” in the

colony, framed and contextualized her presence in the exhibition. Symbols of African backwardness and sexual innuendo pervaded press coverage of Baa. "When West Africa Woos," which appeared in the *Sunday Express* on May 4, 1924, began: "One of the features of Wembley is a West African village ruled by a native princess. Below she tells the story of love as it is made in Akropong." The first half of the article took the form of an interview between the author, Charles Graves, and Baa, whose attire he described as consisting of "down-trodden, men's boots" and "a section of carpet and part of a curtain." She reappeared in the piece's closing vignette, but this time her husband accompanied her. "Apparently," Graves wrote, "the princess was explaining my presence with some difficulty." "Then," he continued, "the prince walked slowly over to the [West African] sergeant and spoke to him. 'He asks . . . whether you wish to know more.' I looked at the princess, coyly hiding her blushes with the fringe of her beloved carpet. No I did not."⁹

Africans in London scrutinized and challenged the version of Africa presented for public consumption in the West Africa "village" and in the press, mounting effectively their own miniature shadow exhibition. Both before and after Wembley opened, the USAD was a hub of activity. Solanke recorded a talk entitled "An Instance of Mortality" in èdè Yorùbá for broadcast as part of a BBC feature on African languages in early 1924, and the USAD held a series of lectures and cultural events featuring prominent visitors to coincide with the official opening. After the exhibition opened, the USAD initiated an extensive letter-writing campaign led by Solanke and Joseph Boakye Danquah from the Gold Coast. The union passed a resolution condemning "When West Africa Woos," and sent copies of it to Colonial Secretary J. H. Thomas, West African newspapers and *West Africa*, the prince of Wales (the president of the Wembley exhibition), the four West African governors, and the proprietor of the *Sunday Express*. It denounced representations of Africans that "hold up to public ridicule citizens of countries whose money has been voted in large sums for the purpose of the exhibition." In a letter to *West Africa*, Danquah challenged the veracity of Rattray's portrayal of Asante social practices, citing several instances of mistranslation, and Solanke delivered a series of lectures "on Egba people and their customs" at the Student Movement House at 32 Russell Square, much of which focused on marriage practices and the position of women in Yorùbá society. Both men devoted significant energy to studies of West Africa in the mid-1920s; Danquah published his own ethnography of the Asante (*Akan Laws and Customs*) in 1928. In so doing, they asserted their expertise against that of

recognized British authorities and challenged the latter's monopoly on the production of knowledge on Africa. By rallying to the defense of African womanhood and presenting reasoned arguments in various public forums, they also demonstrated their capacity to perform the rights and responsibilities of liberal citizenship.¹⁰

According to Solanke, the outrage over the coverage of West Africans at the Wembley Exhibition led directly to the creation of the Nigerian Progress Union and the West African Students Union the following year. He would later claim that the inspiration for his organizing work came from a "dream one night during which Almighty God graciously revealed to me . . . that until Africans at home and abroad, including all persons of African descent, organise and develop the spirit of the principles of self-help, unity and cooperation among themselves, and fight to remove the colour bar, they would have to continue to suffer the results of colour prejudice."¹¹ Solanke's protests in *West Africa* thrust him to the forefront of black activism in London just two years after his arrival and precipitated gestures of solidarity from others of African descent. Amid the uproar over Wembley, the Jamaican Amy Ashwood Garvey, cofounder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and Marcus Garvey's first wife, wrote to express her support. They shared, in particular, a belief in the importance of education, for women and men, as a prerequisite to political and social advancement. Drawing on her organizing experience, in July 1924, Ashwood Garvey, Solanke, and thirteen other Nigerian male students formed the NPU in London. Aided by a letter of introduction from Ashwood Garvey to the editor, Solanke contributed a series of pieces to the African American journal *The Spokesman* in 1925. In "Nigeria: Its Institutions and Customs," he argued "that when we talk or write about any Yourba [*sic*] custom or institution we are speaking about a people who to-day are to be found playing a great part among all Negroes the world over," and he listed the contributions of people of Yorùbá descent across West Africa and in the Americas. In an "Open Letter to the Negroes of the World," he laid out the NPU's platform and called for greater coordination of black struggles around the globe. While demanding the full benefits of imperial citizenship and dominion status for West Africa, he insisted that the continuation of attempts at "enslaving us . . . commercially, industrially and economically" linked West Africa, "especially . . . Nigeria the mighty home of the American and West Indian Negroes," to people of African descent across the Atlantic. With the Garveyite movement in steep decline in the United States, he wrote, "it is important for the assistants and



FIGURE 1. "Two Lawyers" (October 12, 1936), Ladipo Solanke on right. Topical Press Agency/Springer, Hulton Archive, Getty Images.

successors of Mr. Marcus Garvey to note that their organisation . . . has aroused in us . . . our race consciousness although we may disagree with some of the methods of that great Negro organiser." Solanke's political vision already extended far beyond Nigeria's boundaries, a sign of Ashwood Garvey's influence on his thinking.¹²

While in London for the Empire Exhibition, J. Ephraim Casely Hayford and Dr. H. C. Bankole-Bright, the president and chairman, respectively, of the faltering National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), encouraged students and professionals to consolidate existing organizations such as the USAD, NPU, and recently formed Gold Coast Students Union into a single organization dedicated to promoting West African unity. After much debate, on August 7, 1925, a small group of law students from West Africa, led by Solanke and Danquah, established the West African Students Union. Though ostensibly an association of and for West African university students, the union adopted an expansive view of its purpose, and the NCBWA, the first political organization claiming to represent all four of Britain's West African colonies, influenced its ambitions. As Frederick Cooper notes, the organization's "political focus was not Nigeria, the Gold Coast, or Sierra Leone, but the cosmopolitan space that connected all of them." Between the

1880s and 1910s, as Vivian Bickford-Smith puts it, the British “betrayed” creole and educated Africans in favor of white settlers in southern and eastern Africa and “traditional” rulers in West Africa as partners in colonial administration. The NCBWA emerged from the ranks of the former and in response to the way that indirect rule “established and reinforced ethnicized (and religious) collectivities.” As Jemima Pierre observes, “Nativization was racialization, but this racialization worked through ethnicization—the constitution and organization of a constellation of tribal groupings” that became the basis of their incorporation into colonial administration and the empire as a whole. The NCBWA sought “to ensure local rights,” including participation within the colonial legislative council and employment opportunities for qualified Africans, “while acting as representative to natives as a *racial* collective.”¹³ Plans for the first NCBWA conference, held in Accra in March 1920, developed alongside the peace talks at Versailles, and the model of the Indian National Congress and the liberal internationalism of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, in particular, informed its demands. The resolutions passed at the conference asserted “the right of the people to self determination” and their claim to “all and every right of free citizenship of the Empire.” Under the leadership of the Nigerian Herbert Macaulay, the Sierra Leonean Bankole-Bright, and Casely Hayford, Thomas Hutton-Mills Sr., and Kobina Sekyi from the Gold Coast, the NCBWA ratified its own constitution covering the entirety of British West Africa at a second meeting in early 1923. The document emphasized “the promotion of the common interests of the British West African Dependencies politically, economically, educationally, socially . . . to promote and effect unity of purpose and of action among them.”¹⁴ By 1924, support for the NCBWA in West Africa had begun to wane significantly, but it revived the dream of a United West Africa associated with earlier intellectuals such as the Sierra Leonean Africanus Horton and the Afro-Caribbean émigré to Liberia Edward Wilmot Blyden.

The WASU pursued the NCBWA’s goals, including imperial citizenship and dominion status for a West African state, long after the latter organization’s demise and used the union’s position in London to protest the injustices of colonial rule and publicize those struggling against them in the colonies. The founding members included men from all four of the British colonies in West Africa. Bankole-Bright was among the cofounders, and Casely Hayford became its first “patron.” On September 27, 1926, the WASU held a reception for the latter at Pinnoli’s Restaurant. In his remarks, published in the second issue of the group’s journal, Casely Hayford told its

members that the “Congress expresses British West African nationality” and argued that a unified West Africa represented only the first step in the advancement of “African international union and sentiment,” by which “Africans . . . scattered all over the world” would “in time acquire experience of African nationality.” While noting that “the object of the African . . . is the attainment of nationality, the possibility of raising his head among the other peoples of the world, and of commanding his national and racial opportunity,” Casely Hayford urged his audience to repudiate the imposed territorial boundaries that separated them under British rule and “to stretch out a hand to our brethren over the Atlantic who have brotherly yearnings for us, as we have for them.”¹⁵

In 1927, the WASU published a speech by Bankole-Bright, then a member of the Legislative Council in Sierra Leone, as a pamphlet. The inside cover featured a photograph of the speaker in profile, dressed in a fashionable double-breasted suit with a cigar dangling from his mouth. In his address, Bankole-Bright maintained that, contrary to the claim that Britain was expanding liberal freedoms and extending the reach of the rule of law, recent events showed growing discrimination and autocracy in the colonies. He called on his audience to “cry aloud in this Metropolis” for “the rights of true citizenship.”¹⁶ Bankole-Bright’s accusations became a source of concern for the governor of Sierra Leone and the Colonial Office after WASU reprinted them and excerpts appeared in *West Africa* and *Truth*.¹⁷ Hereafter, agents of the imperial state increasingly, if only begrudgingly and paternalistically, engaged in a dialogue with the WASU and especially Solanke, illustrating a growing appreciation of the heightened costs of anticolonial protest in the imperial metropolis.

Under Solanke’s leadership as its general secretary, over the following three decades the WASU became the most important pressure group devoted to African issues and a center of black social and political activity in London. Several generations of prominent West African intellectuals, artists, and politicians passed through its ranks.¹⁸ The WASU issued the first number of its journal, *Wàsù* (Preach), in 1926. By 1933, the union claimed that it circulated widely throughout Britain’s four West African colonies, the United States, and the Caribbean and was “well-known in East and South Africa, especially in Kenya and Uganda.”¹⁹ In the inaugural issue, the Sierra Leonean H.J.L. Boston proposed a self-governing federal state in West Africa as a means to satisfy the “desire [for] union but not unity,” and asserted that the West African increasingly “centres his interests, not only on the Colony from

which he hails, but also on that part of the continent designated West Africa; *to him West Africa has a meaning; to him West Africa has a future.*"²⁰ Danquah described the WASU's purpose as helping "to create a healthy national sentiment throughout the whole of West Africa," but the WASU was not nationalist in the usual sense of the term. As James Coleman states, its activities focused on "the awakening of a racial, not a territorial, consciousness." Nigerians like Solanke often outnumbered other West Africans in the union, but "in no instance were native-born Nigerians encouraged . . . to think of Nigeria as an individual national entity or to feel that they were Nigerians." For the WASU, "'Race,' 'African,' and 'nationality' were interchangeable, almost synonymous, terms."²¹ The factors leading to the founding of the union, and the intellectual and political tributaries that shaped its aims, were imperial, regional, and transatlantic in nature.

The group's members crafted a capacious political imaginary that encompassed the whole of British West Africa and a wider black Atlantic world from a number of different sources, including the regional federalism of the NCBWA, liberal and socialist variants of internationalism, and the ideas of African American intellectuals. Solanke read the NAACP's *The Crisis* for the first time in London and corresponded with and forwarded copies of *Wāsu* to its editor, Du Bois. Marcus Garvey was an important source of inspiration and ally to the WASU in its early years. He helped to finance the launch of its journal and transferred the lease on his residence in West Kensington to the union when he left London in 1928.²² Yet the WASU's interpretation of African history and culture and its political vision for West Africa more closely resembled the ideas of Alain Locke. Employing Franz Boas's notion of cultural diffusion in the elaboration of his own ideas, Locke insisted on an analytical approach that highlighted the "reciprocal cultural interchange and influence, of Negro on white, and white on Negro."²³ As early as 1916, he argued that when "modern man talks about race," he is really talking about ethnicity and, what is more, that ethnic groups might be termed more accurately "ethnic fictions," as such groupings were "the products of countless interminglings . . . the result of infinite crossings."²⁴ In 1928, Locke addressed the WASU in London. He claimed that racism and nationalism were two sides of the same coin, the one depending on the other for its coherence, and that internationalism would be the defining feature of an emerging "new world." "In this time of revolution," he argued, "our racial thinking must rise to a higher plane; and just as there is no room in progressive thought to-day for narrow and selfish nationalism, so there is also no

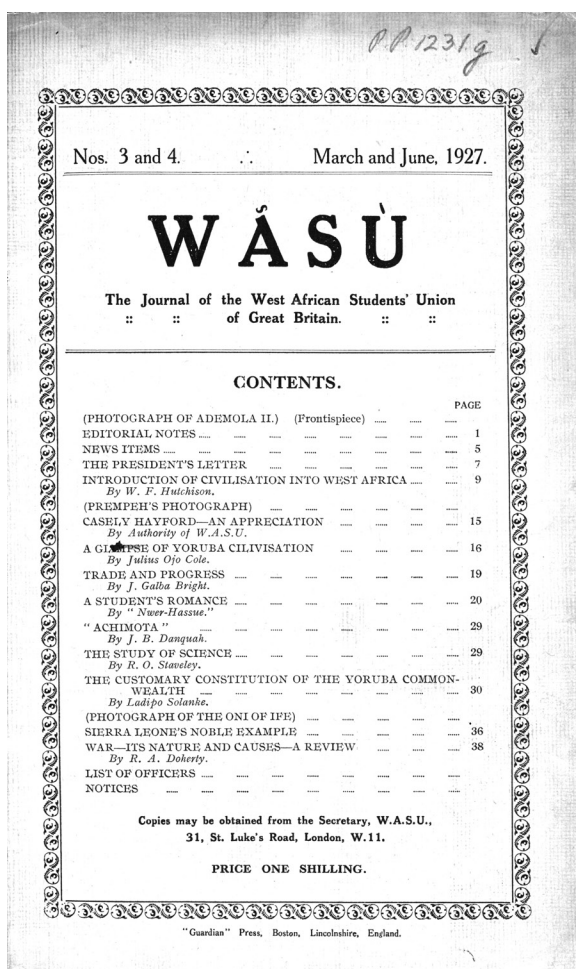


FIGURE 2. Cover of *Wāṣù: The Journal of the West African Students' Union of Great Britain* 3–4 (March–June 1927). © The British Library Board.

proper place for narrow and selfish racialism." Far from representing a retrograde turn to ethnic separatism or chauvinism, the movement toward pan-African cooperation epitomized the "new internationalism" of the age. Locke conceded that mutual ignorance and vast differences in history and circumstance continued to divide, as he put it, "the now separated branches of the Negro peoples." Nevertheless, he insisted, "people will be most efficient who live in terms of the greatest possible synthesis of civilisations, and we

welcome this difficult task which our peculiar heritage and history imposes [*sic*] upon us.”²⁵

The WASU interpreted Locke’s vision of black internationalism through the lens of the union’s understanding of West Africa’s past. Reiterating Locke’s arguments but placing greater emphasis on cultural exchange in Africa (as opposed to the Americas), the editorial that prefaced his reprinted speech declared: “Throughout her history Africa seemed to have been nature’s experimental ground for the fusion of various cultures and civilisations. . . . Thus to-day Africa is the richest continent in racial types and harbours . . . the greatest conglomeration of men of all shades of colour, custom and cultures.” This long history of ethnic and cultural blending represented Africa’s unique “spiritual heritage” and Africans’ primary contribution to human civilization, the quality that both defined and secured their place in the “family of nations.”²⁶ To the extent that the WASU celebrated a distinctive Africanness, it was one defined by continuous, if varying, patterns of cultural mixture, not an innate racial essence. Locke’s notion of modern New Negroes as a racial avant garde paralleled union members’ self-presentation as the leaders of a new Africa, and the WASU’s journal offered copies of the *New Negro* for sale to its readers, but the subtle differences between their ideas reflected the greater importance that the WASU accorded to the agency of Africans, past and present.

Through *Wásù*—especially the writings of Solanke and its early editors Danquah, Melville C. Marke, Julius Ojo-Cole, and Ohenenana Cobina Kessie—and pamphlets like Joseph William de Graft Johnson’s *Towards Nationhood in West Africa* (1928), the WASU disseminated a regional and circum-Atlantic perspective on the West African past as part of a comprehensive view of the region’s place in an interconnected world. Originally from the Gold Coast, de Graft Johnson wrote: “The hope and desire of Africa is the same throughout the length and breadth of the continent. It is concentrated in the great yearning for freedom” and for “recognition in the Comity of Nations.” The WASU contributed to this struggle by “correlating lines of thought and action.”²⁷ Steeped in a West African intellectual tradition stretching back to Dr. James Africanus Beale Horton and Bishop James Johnson in the mid-nineteenth century, Solanke lectured and produced writings on West African history, culture, and customs, based in part on research for his MA thesis on Yorùbá marriage practices.²⁸ In his short history of West Africa, *United West Africa (or Africa) at the Bar of the Family of Nations* (1927), he drew upon forerunners such as Blyden and Samuel Johnson, as well

as racist imperial historiography, to demonstrate the existence of a common ancient culture in West Africa, a “separate sort of civilization [that] Africa had since given to the Family of Nations,” and “to prove that all the various peoples inhabiting Abyssinia, the Sudan, Egypt, North Africa, and all along the Mediterranean shores have from the earliest times been so closely connected with the inhabitants of West Africa.” On the basis of their linked histories, he asserted, “the more we are together the happier we shall be.” Believing that the WASU and its published organ had an important role to play in the “complete Restoration, Regeneration, and second Rise of West Africa,” Solanke stressed the need for an African hostel in London as “a training ground for practical unity and effective co-operation” and an expression of “West African individuality.” “The time has come,” he argued, “when West African nationality must find a permanent foothold in Great Britain.”²⁹

A particular conception of Yorùbá-ness, itself the product of the transatlantic traffic among Africans linking British West Africa to Brazil and the Caribbean, lay at the heart of Solanke’s analysis and the WASU’s distinctive brand of internationalism. As J. Lorand Matory has shown, mission-educated African, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Caribbean returnees to towns along the West African coast, especially Lagos, cultivated this notion of Yorùbá identity beginning in the 1890s.³⁰ The ongoing dialogue between people of African descent in the diaspora and the West African intelligentsia shaped Solanke’s perspective on West African history, and a congratulatory reader’s letter indicates that *Wásù* circulated in Brazil. Solanke contributed the article “Unity and Co-operation” to the journal’s fifth issue. As in *United West Africa*, he drew on a wide array of sources—from ancient texts to more recent works such as Leo Frobenius’s *The Voice of Africa* (1923), Joseph Thompson’s *Mungo Park* (1898), Martin S. Kisch’s *Letters and Sketches from Northern Nigeria* (1910), and Samuel Johnson’s *The History of the Yorubas from the earliest times to the beginning of the British Protectorate* (edited by Obadiah Johnson, 1921)—to trace a history of contact and mutual influence stretching from Egypt, Abyssinia, and eastern Sudan to the coast of Benin and Nigeria. Mobilizing Frobenius’s notion of a unique “Atlantic Civilisation” emanating from Ife, the ancient Yorùbá city in southwestern Nigeria, Solanke suggested that the Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans marked a tragic departure from this history of intra-African exchange whose consequences, including British colonization, nonetheless created the conditions for West African unity in the present, because of the resettlement of liberated Africans like those who became the Saro of Nigeria and Krio of Sierra Leone.³¹ In “The Solidarity of the African Race,” Prince Adetokunbo

Adegboyega Ademola, the son of the Alake of the Egba, maintained that “the West African tribes have from time immemorial been closely related one with the other,” and cited the demographics of the slave trade and extant traces of Asante and Yorùbá cultural practices and folklore in Jamaica and the United States to establish an analogous connection between West Africans and people of African descent in the Caribbean and the Americas.³² Similarly, the Sierra Leonean Krio (or Creole) Robert Wellesley Cole claimed that an experiential “West African sense” had developed in conjunction with an appreciation of these deep historical linkages and an awareness of the necessity for “self-help” and cooperation in the present.³³ West African intellectuals in the WASU, especially self-identified Yorùbás and Krios, pointed to cultural blending as the hallmark of African history. Connected to each other and an array of non-African cultures by processes of long duration, Africans and dispersed populations of African descent around the world were cultural hybrids and embodiments of internationalism.

In the late 1920s, West Africans were the primary catalysts behind black internationalist thought and activity in London. The members of the WASU articulated and performed a conception of *Africanness* that was both modern and cosmopolitan, a conception that contradicted the one on display at Wembley. They attached particular significance to the long history of cultural mixture in West Africa, extending to the region’s links to people of African descent across the Atlantic, as the cornerstone of a philosophical and political commitment to internationalism. Citing the examples of a broad resurgence throughout the Afro-Asian world, Danquah asked in the inaugural issues of *Wāsiù*, “What then . . . has he [the Negro] contributed?” He suggested that people of Africa descent had “aroused the world to a higher level of ethical idealism and to a far deeper humanitarian conception of life. . . . A new humanity of Negroes is rising from the forsaken ashes of the past.”³⁴ In the near future, African intellectuals in the WASU argued, the accumulated weight of these historical connections would give rise to a regional federation in West Africa—an entity capable of accommodating difference within a unified structure, of serving as a building block for a transformed British Commonwealth, and of facilitating lateral connections still farther afield. They argued that the choice was not between remaining subjugated colonies and becoming independent nation-states along colonial lines, but rather between exclusionary nationalisms that bred racial hatred, on the one hand, and internationalism based on formal equality and an embrace of cultural differences and exchange, on the other.

HAROLD A. MOODY AND THE LEAGUE OF COLOURED PEOPLES

Contrary to the image of a happy imperial family projected at Wembley, racial barriers hardened in both Britain and the colonies after 1919. Everyday manifestations of racism increased, such as denying people of African descent service at hotels and restaurants, demonstrating that a *de facto* (if not *de jure*) color bar operated in the metropole as well as the empire. In 1929, the *Times* reported that London's Savoy Grill had refused to serve the African American entertainer Paul Robeson, causing a minor scandal, but for most of the city's black residents this type of incident was all too familiar.³⁵ The Joint Council to Promote Understanding between White and Coloured People in Great Britain found in 1933 that "London hotels are quite prepared to receive coloured visitors from the East as guests either to sleep or take meals but . . . did not feel able to receive persons of Negroid race." The same pattern would persist in the market for long-term rentals for decades to come.³⁶ The prevalence of racism shocked newcomers who arrived with idealized visions of the "mother country" as the home of fair play and gentlemanliness. Writing in 1934, Nyasilie Magxaka recalled, "I thought that on leaving South Africa for England, I was at the same time leaving the infamous colour bar behind and was coming to the paradise of freedom." To the contrary, "the treatment of coloured people in London almost forces one to believe that [the] colour bar is the policy of the British Empire."³⁷

Discrimination forced qualified black professionals into private practice and brought them together in organizing efforts that yielded some of the earliest black organizations in Britain. The Trinidadian physician John Alcindor, who maintained a private practice in London, participated in the African Association's Pan-African Conference in 1900 and served as president of the short-lived African Progress Union. Dr. Cecil Belfield Clarke from Barbados practiced medicine in the London Borough of Southwark for nearly fifty years between the 1920s and 1960s. He was active in the WASU, a founding member of the League of Coloured Peoples, and in the late 1930s, worked with the Trinidadian radicals George Padmore and C. L. R. James in the International African Service Bureau.

The Jamaican physician Dr. Harold Arundel Moody came to England in 1904 as a twenty-two-year-old student. He settled in London, in part to help his younger brothers through King's College: Ludlow Moody, whose first wife, Vera, was Norman Manley's sister, returned to Jamaica and became a

government bacteriologist, and Ronald Moody became a dentist and a renowned sculptor.³⁸ Moody later admitted that his perception of Africa and his African ancestors reflected the racial hierarchy in colonial Jamaica when he arrived: "I had been educated away from my heritage and towards the country which I had learnt to call 'home.' My desire then was to have as little as possible to do with my own people and upon Africans I looked down as a species too low in the rank of human development for me in any way to associate with. I was black indeed but I was not African, nor was I in any way related to Africa. . . . At heart I really believed I was English."³⁹ Moody does not appear to have participated in the few existing black associations while in medical school during the war or following his graduation in 1919. Years of exposure to racial prejudice in Britain gradually altered his understanding of the relationship between his racial identity and Britishness. In December 1927, he addressed the USAD in London in a speech that focused on the problems to which he would devote the remainder of his life—racism and self-determination for the Caribbean and Africa.⁴⁰ By the 1930s, he identified with a color-blind conception of imperial citizenship and a transnational conception of blackness, linking him to others of African descent. Moody presided over the League of Coloured Peoples from its founding in 1931 until his death in 1947. From his Victorian home and medical practice at 164 Queen's Road in the southeastern suburb of Peckham, he managed the league's activities and hosted scores of African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American visitors and sojourners.

Though occasionally disparaged by British officials and more radical black activists in his own time, Moody made an enduring contribution to black cultural and political life in London. As David Killingray points out, he likely addressed more white Britons than any of his contemporaries, and he wrote at least four short books or pamphlets on race relations in Britain. He lectured Britons on the evils of racial prejudice in letters to newspapers and as a lay preacher.⁴¹ Moody became a champion of unity among people of African descent but continued to emphasize the necessity of interracial cooperation throughout his life. His religiosity underlay his reformist politics, pacifism, and liberal internationalism, and his standing as a medical expert was central to his self-identification as an intellectual and exemplary representative of his race. Moody converted to Congregationalism in his school days and remained active in the church thereafter, delivering sermons nearly every Sunday and serving as chairman of the London Missionary Society in 1943. The nonconformist tradition's emphasis on redemption for all through Christ dovetailed

with his message of inclusiveness and equality. He frequently used his scientific knowledge and medical metaphors in his writings, speeches, and sermons, describing racism, for example, as the “infection in the blood stream” of the British Empire. During a speech in Wolverhampton in October 1929, he described Africa as the cradle of humanity and argued that “examined scientifically, anatomically, or physiologically, there is nothing in the organic make-up of coloured people that implies inferiority.”⁴² As Moody and officials in the Colonial Office recognized, the respect and authority that accrued from his status as an educated professional and an upstanding Christian lent considerable weight to his appeals to white audiences.

In 1931 Moody, along with a group of black and South Asian professionals, British liberals and feminists, and the Society of Friends, began meeting to consider new initiatives to address the color bar in Britain. The immediate result was the Joint Council to Promote Understanding between White and Coloured People in Great Britain, a public relations and charitable organization with strong ties to several religious groups. The founders modeled the body on the multiracial joint councils in South Africa, reflecting the connections between South African and British liberal critics of racism and colonialism. The Quaker John Fletcher headed the council, and Moody served as vice-chairman. The non-Europeans in the group argued in favor of a separate organization under their control. South Asians, including the former member of the Legislative Council in Kenya R. S. Nehra, wanted it to address the concerns of all non-Europeans in Britain, but Moody insisted that the plight of people of African descent deserved special attention. The NAACP in the United States inspired his efforts, due in part to the presence of the Harvard-educated African American historian from Howard University Charles Wesley, who was in London on a Guggenheim fellowship. Wesley and Moody spoke at a series of YMCA-sponsored functions in early 1931 to rally support for the proposed organization.

On March 13, Moody chaired a meeting at the Central London YMCA on Tottenham Court Road, where “some seventy coloured people and others” formed the League of Coloured Peoples, citing “the desire, born of an innate sense of independence and racial pride, to help ourselves.” The LCP became the first multiracial organization in Britain led by people of African descent. The new organization held its first official meeting at London’s Memorial Hall on June 5. In addition to black professionals and students, sympathetic politicians such as Ellen Wilkinson and representatives of British missionary organizations, the Friends Society, and the Anti-Slavery

and Aborigines' Protection Society (ASAPS) took part. The LCP declared its aims: "To promote and protect the Social, Educational, Economic and Political interests of its members. To interest members in the Welfare of Coloured Peoples in all parts of the World. To improve relations between the Races. To co-operate with organisations sympathetic to Coloured People." The word *coloured* never lost its broader connotations as encompassing all non-Europeans, and a few South Asians participated in the league for extended periods. Nehra was a member of the league's executive committee and its first treasurer, and the Sri Lankan Pastor Kamal Churchie served as its vice president from 1935 to 1937. During the early 1930s, Moody collaborated with Churchie, R. K. Sorabji, and the Christian Sikh Shoran Singha in the Coloured Men's Institute, a religious and social center for non-European seamen in London. The LCP held social events jointly with India House and the Commonwealth of India League and hosted receptions for visiting members of the Indian National Congress such as Gandhi and Nehru. Nevertheless, Moody envisioned it as an organization dedicated, first and foremost, to giving a voice to people of African descent around the world, and advocating on their behalf occupied the bulk of the league's efforts throughout its existence. "As far as we are concerned," Moody explained, "this term includes everybody, because there are no WHITE people. . . . We therefore admit all people as members. For practical purpose[s] . . . , however, our work is mainly confined to people of African descent—at present mainly West Indian and West African—although we have some Indians in our ranks."⁴³

Afro-Caribbeans predominated within the LCP, but it was hardly an exclusively Caribbean group. Its membership reflected the increasing interaction among Africans, Caribbeans, and African Americans, especially visiting scholars and entertainers, in the city. In addition to Moody as president, the LCP's executive committee consisted of George Roberts (Trinidad), Dr. Belfield Clarke (Barbados), Samson Morris (Grenada), Robert Adams (British Guiana), and Desmond Buckle (Gold Coast). C. L. R. James attended early LCP conferences and contributed to its journal. The group's founding members also included the Grenadian politician and early champion of the West Indies Federation Theophilus Albert Marryshow, who was in London to lobby the Colonial Office. The Barbour James family was a prominent presence in the league. John Alexandra Barbour James, originally from British Guiana, worked for the post office in the Gold Coast between 1902 and 1917, while his wife and family lived in London. After his wife Caroline

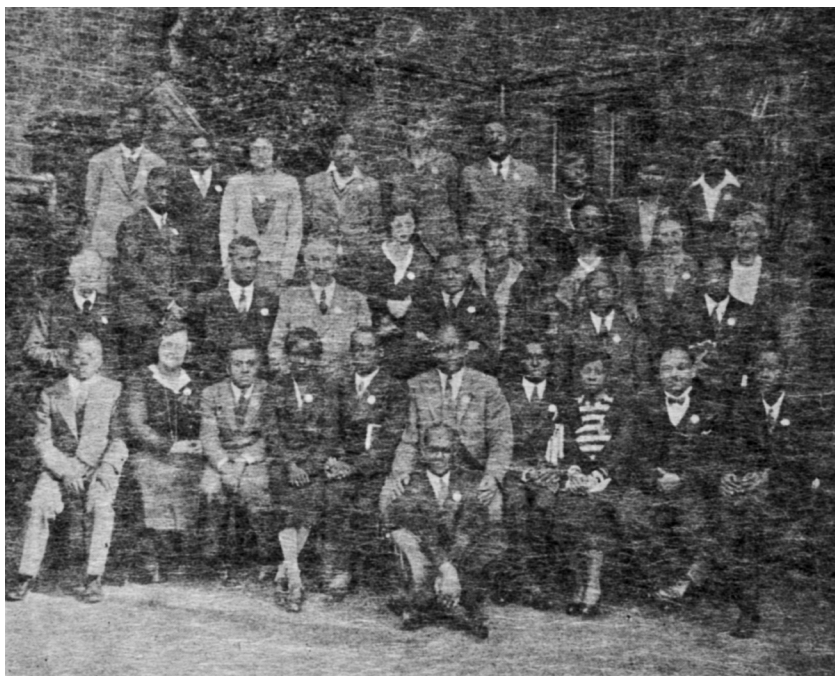


FIGURE 3. Group photograph from League of Coloured Peoples Conference, including (seated first row) Dr. Harold Arundel Moody (*center*), founder and president of the league, Una Marson (*right of Moody*), and C.L.R. James (*far right*). *The Keys* 1, no. 1 (July 1933): 3. © The British Library Board.

died, in 1920, he married Edith Rita Goring, a teacher from Barbados who had also worked in the Gold Coast. Both became central figures in the LCP; John held the office of vice president and remained active in the group until he returned to the Caribbean in 1938. His London-born daughter Amy Barbour James, a concert singer who studied with Amanda Aldridge, helped organize many of the group's events and served on its executive committee.⁴⁴ West Africans such as Dr. Crispin Curtis Adeniyi-Jones from Sierra Leone, Stephen and Stella Thomas from Nigeria, and Kobina Sekyi from the Gold Coast participated in its activities, and the Kenyan Johnstone (later Jomo) Kenyatta contributed to its journal. The African American actors Paul Robeson and Beresford Gale also joined the organization.

In the early 1930s, the LCP intervened in issues as diverse as discrimination in the professions in Britain, the plight of black seamen and children of working-class interracial couples in Cardiff and Liverpool, and censorship in the colonies. The league assisted individuals with securing housing and

employment, raised funds for hurricane victims in British Honduras, and joined the international campaign in defense of the Scottsboro Boys in the United States. Within months of establishing the organization, Moody began corresponding with Walter White of the NAACP and Dr. Carter G. Woodson of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The *Journal of Negro History* published a letter from Moody recounting the league's work to date. By the beginning of 1934, the LCP had small branches in Liverpool, Cardiff, British Guiana, Jamaica, Panama, and Sierra Leone.⁴⁵

Through its various activities and particularly its quarterly journal, *The Keys*, the LCP lobbied for equal rights for British subjects of all races while elaborating a vision of black unity that extended beyond the British Empire. A critique of the color bar as a global phenomenon linked these two aspects of its work. The opening editorial of *The Keys* declared: "Our task lies in stating the cause of our brothers and sisters within the British Empire. We cannot afford however to ignore the claims of the peoples of colour who owe allegiance to a flag other than our own. All along the line there is the same tale. . . . Recent happenings in England, Kenya and the U.S.A. show . . . that we have reached a critical period in the history of our race. Never was there a greater need for unity within our ranks." The journal's title referred to Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey's use of piano keys as a metaphor for interracial harmony, but it also positioned the journal as the proverbial key that would open the door barring black advancement. "Our plea . . . is for equality of opportunity. We are knocking at the door and will not be denied. 'The Keys' will, we trust, be an open sesame to better racial understanding and goodwill."⁴⁶ To the end of his life, Moody maintained his belief that the imperium could be reformed into a mutually beneficial association built on the celebration of cultural differences. Though shaped by different circumstances in Jamaica and less confrontational in its tactics than many of the African intellectuals in the WASU, the LCP championed black unity in terms broadly commensurate to the latter, as part of a global movement toward greater cooperation and integration, and maintained that an extensive history of Atlantic exchange placed people of African descent at the forefront of this development, making them the avant garde of the age of internationalism. As Clare McFarlane put it in his remarks at a Wilberforce centenary celebration in Port Maria, Jamaica, which appeared in *The Keys*: "By the very circumstance of being cut off from our natural or racial origins, we, in these West Indies, are favourably placed for leading the way in the acquirement of an international consciousness . . . the outlook which will

regard the world as a single place and all men as brothers.” This, he argued, “is the peculiar task allotted to these islands and the distinctive contribution to world affairs which it is their privilege to make.”⁴⁷ McFarlane’s outline of Caribbean history paralleled Solanke’s view of West Africa’s past, and they came to broadly similar conclusions regarding the international importance of black struggles in the present.

During its early years, the LCP provided greater opportunities for women’s involvement than did other London-based organizations such as the WASU, but its male leadership, starting with its president and patriarch, conformed to a middle-class ideal of respectability that in certain ways restricted women’s participation and engagement with its journal’s readers. Whereas male members and officers presided over meetings and wrote editorials and essays on history, economics, and political issues for *The Keys*, women’s public contributions to the league were overwhelmingly social and artistic. By embracing the cultural project associated with black internationalism, women established a position from which to counter British racism, to contribute to the creation of a black public sphere in London and new transatlantic connections, and to link black unity to feminist concerns. Moody and his English wife, Olive Mabel Tranter, opened their Peckham home to a succession of female new arrivals, providing appropriately respectable lodgings to Afro-Caribbean and African women, from Una Marson in the early 1930s to Irene Cole, Robert Wellesley Cole’s younger sister, in the early 1940s. In the mid-1930s, the league’s executive committee included Barbour James, Dorothy Clarke (Bermuda), Sylvia Lowe (Jamaica), and Viola Thompson (Sierra Leone). Constance Horton (Sierra Leone), Dulcina Armstrong (British Guiana), Audrey Jeffers (Trinidad), and Dr. Hyacinth Lightbourne (Jamaica) participated in the group as well. Stella Thomas studied law at the Middle Temple and was active in both the WASU and LCP before becoming the first female barrister in British West Africa. The Jamaican writer Una Marson volunteered as the LCP’s unpaid secretary in autumn 1933, becoming the first in a series of Caribbean women whose labor maintained the organization throughout its existence. Until 1935, she was the primary editor of *The Keys*, handled the group’s correspondence, and organized its varied social calendar, which allowed her to establish connections among London’s black cultural producers and organizations that she would utilize throughout her career.

Marson and other women in the league broke new ground for black art in the imperial metropolis. An all-black cast of predominantly league members, starring the brilliant Stella Thomas, performed Marson’s drama *At What a*

Price at the YWCA Central Club Hall and then London's Scala Theatre. Other LCP functions featured performances of spirituals and poetry readings, and *The Keys* celebrated the accomplishments of black recitalists.⁴⁸ Marson organized a league concert at the Indian Students' Hostel on October 21, 1933, at which the Alabama native John Payne, Ike Hatch, and Amy Barbour James sang a program of spirituals, accompanied by the Guyanese musicians Rudolph Dunbar and Bruce Wendell on the clarinet and piano. The same year, Dunbar and his orchestra, which *The Keys* described as "the finest coloured Orchestra in London," provided the music at the group's farewell dance for the West Indies cricket team. Paul Robeson was scheduled to open the league's "bazaar" in March 1935, organized by Sylvia Lowe. When he had to cancel, Payne and Sail Rodgers sang in his place.⁴⁹

Marson established *The Keys* as the most prominent black publication in Britain, with a monthly worldwide circulation of more than two thousand by 1934. She also made it a rare forum for black literature in Britain, exposing readers to the work of contemporary African American authors, and Caribbean women contributed much of its original literary content.⁵⁰ Poems like Marson's "Nigger" and Lowe's "Disillusionment (After seeing the Trooping of the Colour)," in which the narrator is "For ever broken by our welcome here," captured the mix of pain and anger shared by many black sojourners.⁵¹ Poems denouncing the color bar appeared alongside inspirational verse such as Margaret R. Seon's "Vision," addressed to an emerging transatlantic "nation . . . but within its springtime." In Lowe's "The Stamp of Freedom (Written by the great-grand-daughter of a West Indian slave, on meeting an African girl)," two black women separated by an ocean and "con-course" with "other men" enact the pan-African embrace, equating liberation with collaboration among women of the black world: "O daughter of a grand and ancient race, / . . . You come, swift from the waking Afric dawn. / . . . Long have we wandered far beyond your shores, / With other men had con-course; but your arts / Move kindred feelings in us, . . . You call us back. Within us something stirred."⁵² Like the writings of male pan-Africanists, Lowe's poem centered on the themes of dispersal and return, but she used interactions among black women, facilitated by art, to represent the reunion of diasporic blacks and Africans.

The LCP became a mainstay of black London and a functional link between agitation in the colonies and the metropole. Its fortnightly events offered a rare social outlet for its denizens. Soon after Marson resigned from her post as editor in March 1935, however, the league lost several of its most

active women, and though *The Keys* continued an uninterrupted run until the start of World War II, its literary content declined sharply after its first three years.

BLACK PROTEST AND THE BRITISH LEFT

The memberships of the LCP and WASU overlapped considerably in the early 1930s. WASU members published in *The Keys*, and the union sent the league copies of *Wasu*. The groups focused their protests on many of the same issues, establishing the coordinates of a political imaginary largely shared by them despite their differences, and their social functions attracted the relatively small pool of student sojourners, hungry for interaction and a sense of belonging. The international campaign in defense of the Scottsboro Boys and agitation against growing government censorship in the Caribbean and Africa galvanized black intellectuals and linked their efforts in London to the struggles of Africans and others of African descent elsewhere. These causes also brought them into greater contact with potential allies associated with the Second (socialist) and Third (communist) Internationals, often via black radical intermediaries.

Black activists' and intellectuals' connections to the international communist movement varied widely but tended to be intermittent and pragmatic.⁵³ From its inception in 1919, the Third International espoused anti-imperialism, and in 1928, the Sixth Congress of the Comintern reaffirmed its commitment to the liberation of colonized populations throughout the world and the subjugated black masses of the American South. "In doing so," as Hakim Adi writes, the Comintern "became, perhaps, the era's sole international white-led movement to adopt an avowedly antiracist platform, and it was certainly the only one formally dedicated to a revolutionary transformation of the global political *and* racial order."⁵⁴ But the Sixth Congress also directed national communist parties to treat socialists and race-based organizations as enemies, exacerbating sectarian in-fighting and greatly limiting the possibilities for collaboration on the left. The small size of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), racism among the party rank and file, and the failure of operatives to engage systematically in organizing efforts among colonial workers greatly limited the Comintern's achievements. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Afro-Caribbeans George Padmore, Arnold Ward, and Chris Braithwaite (alias Jones) worked through the institutions and

infrastructure of the Communist International to forge networks among people of African descent, but all three ultimately severed their ties with the Comintern in the mid-1930s following the advent of the new Soviet Popular Front policy, which sacrificed anti-imperialism for anti-fascist solidarity in Europe.

The British branch of the communist-affiliated League Against Imperialism (LAI), formed in Brussels in 1927, became the center of a great deal of anticolonial and antiracist activity until 1937. Under the former diplomat Reginald Bridgeman, the LAI actively cultivated allies among liberals, socialists, and Asian, Caribbean, and African agitators, representing something of an exception to the “class against class” policy of the “Third Period” after 1928. At its annual meeting in 1933, the LAI passed a resolution that pledged its support to the campaign for the release of the Scottsboro defendants and the “struggles of the Negro Workers in Africa and the West Indies for complete freedom and self-determination.” The Barbadians Ward and Braithwaite had ties to Bridgeman and other communists in the LAI such as Hugo Rathbone. In 1931, Ward formed the Negro Welfare Association (NWA) with their assistance, and directed the group’s political and social welfare activities as its secretary until 1936, coordinating the greater part of the Scottsboro agitation in London. Braithwaite, a former dockworker who lived with his white wife in Stepney, served on the NWA’s executive committee and ran the Colonial Seamen’s Association.

The most influential Afro-Caribbean communist operating in Europe during the early 1930s was George Padmore. Born Malcolm Nurse, he traveled from Trinidad to the United States in 1924 to study medicine and later entertained plans to study law, but he became immersed in politics and joined the communist party. He worked briefly in Harlem with African American radicals formerly associated with the African Blood Brotherhood before moving to Washington, D.C., where he participated in communist organizing at Howard University. Padmore became a full-time Comintern publicist and organizer for the next four years. The Red International of Trade Unions (the Profintern) appointed him head of its tiny Negro Bureau (officially known as the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers), and he directed it and edited its journal, *Negro Worker*, from Hamburg until the Nazi’s rise to power. As Susan Pennybacker writes, “It is no exaggeration to suggest that Padmore himself *became* the Negro Committee in the few short years of its greatest prominence, years encompassing the early campaign around Scottsboro.” Circulated clandestinely by

black and colonial seamen, often disguised as religious tracts, Padmore's writings on Scottsboro helped publicize the case and the international movement to free the victims throughout the black world.⁵⁵

A number of Africans also had at least a passing engagement with communism, but very few maintained a lasting affiliation with the party. Beginning in the late 1920s, Bridgeman and Rathbone of the LAI were in contact with the WASU, hoping to reach African students in Britain as well as anticolonial and trade unionist movements in West Africa. Jonathan Derrick estimates that several dozen Africans attended the KUTVU, or Communist University of the Toilers of the East, during the late 1920s and 1930s. Bankole Awooner-Renner from the Gold Coast, who published an anthology of poems (*This Africa*) in Moscow in 1928, was one of the first. The Sierra Leonean trade unionist Isaac Theophilus Akunna Wallace-Johnson spent several months there at about the same time. Kenyatta first came to London in 1929 as the general secretary of the Kikuyu Central Association to deliver a petition to the Colonial Office demanding the release of the imprisoned Kikuyu leader Harry Thuku. He met Padmore in Frankfurt later that year, and the pair traveled together to Moscow. In London, he connected with Solanke and the WASU as well as socialist critics of settler colonialism in Kenya such as Norman Leys and Isabel and William McGregor Ross and communists in the LAI. He contributed to the *Sunday Worker* and the new *Daily Worker* before returning to Kenya in September 1930. By mid-1931, Kenyatta was back in London to testify before the Parliamentary Joint Committee on East Africa and made a second trip to the Soviet Union in 1932–1933. Both he and Wallace-Johnson continued to publish in communist outlets during the mid-1930s. Wallace-Johnson organized protests in support of the Scottsboro Boys in Lagos and sent news of them to Padmore in Hamburg. After colonial authorities deported him from Nigeria, he and the former WASU president J. B. Danquah addressed a Scottsboro meeting in Accra on February 6, 1934.⁵⁶

A younger group of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans established ties to the communist party in the late 1930s and 1940s. Desmond Buckle from the Gold Coast, who was active in the LCP in the mid-1930s, became the first African member of the CPGB in 1937. The Barbadian Peter Blackman studied at Durham University and was posted to Gambia as a missionary, but he soon soured on missionary work because of discrimination in pay and other “unchristian racist practices.” He returned to Barbados for a time before settling in London in 1938, where he gravitated to Dr. Moody and the LCP

because of his missionary background. With the start of *The Keys*' sixth volume, he assumed the roles of editor and general secretary of the LCP. However, Blackman became increasingly involved in the LAI and NWA, headquartered in the office of the CPGB's Colonial Bureau. Although Moody eventually expelled him from the LCP for expressing "anti-British" views, for a time he helped push *The Keys* in a more critical direction and strengthened ties between the NWA and LCP.⁵⁷

The international campaign in support of the Scottsboro Boys—the nine black youths who had been accused, then hastily convicted, with all but one sentenced to death, for raping two white women on a train en route from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Paint Rock, Alabama—provided the occasion for momentary collaboration as well as the airing of mutual suspicions between the far left and the two main black organizations in London. Both the WASU and the LCP officially opposed communism, and the deeply religious president of the league rejected it on moral as well as political grounds. Party operatives, in turn, derided these groups as bourgeois opportunists or imperialist lackeys, especially Moody and the league. Nevertheless, the WASU collaborated with and enjoyed the support of the LAI and the few black communists working for the Comintern. Even Moody proved willing to work with communists via the London-based Scottsboro Defence Committee.

In June 1932, Ada Wright, the mother of two of the defendants, arrived in London. She visited Parliament and addressed crowds throughout the British Isles to launch a European publicity tour by the communist International Labor Defense. She spoke to a crowded LCP meeting. Moody corresponded with Walter White of the NAACP about the visit, and the two shared information on their parallel efforts and the communist-led legal defense team in the United States. As financial secretary of the LAI, Bridgeman served as her host and formed a loose alliance including black activists of various political persuasions alongside white and Asian communists, socialists, and liberals. Kenyatta and Cobina Kessie, the current editor of *Wāsu*, were among the Scottsboro Defence Committee's vice presidents and secretaries. The African American singer and stage performer Isaac "Ike" Hatch was the only other black member of the executive committee. A New York City native, Hatch had settled in London in 1925, and worked as a nightclub host and singer in Soho, often alongside Caribbean, African, and black British musicians. In the summer of 1933, he presided over a Scottsboro gala at the Phoenix Theater. A diverse roster of black entertainers took part, including black minstrel acts like the Mississippi Page Boys and the Black Flashers, the classically trained

musicians John Payne and Rudolph Dunbar, the Gold Coast Quartet, and the then-relatively unknown Guyanese dancer Ken Johnson. The next year, the *Daily Worker* reunion party boasted Hatch and the Kentucky Minstrels as well as a “carnival Dance Band.” As Pennybacker notes, Hatch “helped to create the vogue of Scottsboro,” but working behind the scenes, Arnold Ward remained at the center of Scottsboro activity in London.⁵⁸

Both the WASU and LCP compared white supremacy in the United States to the racial politics undergirding the British Empire. The long editorial that opened the first issue of *The Keys* connected the Scottsboro case to racial discrimination and violence in British colonies in South and East Africa and “on our very doorsteps in Cardiff, Liverpool, and London and elsewhere.” The author declared: “Scottsboro is a challenge to the Coloured Races. It is just as much our case, and cause, as it is the case of the prisoners, and we, like them, are on trial.” Despite Moody’s personal misgivings and Ward’s distrust of him, the liberal reformer and the communist collaborated publicly. At a meeting in December 1933, Ward proposed a resolution on Scottsboro, which the league passed, forwarded to the U.S. consul in London, and published in *The Keys*. The resolution registered the members’ “unanimous protest against the recrudescence of the Lynching of Negroes in the United States of America,” which produced “race friction not only in America but throughout the world,” and called on “the United States Government to put an end to this incident which has stirred the emotions of the whole world white and black alike.”⁵⁹ In a 1934 editorial under the heading “‘Nigger’ Hunting in America and Africa,” *Wāsu* compared the British suppression of the Women’s War of 1929 in southeastern Nigeria to the lynching of African Americans in the United States. “British justice” in the empire, the WASU suggested, was little better than lynch law.⁶⁰

With the Scottsboro campaign in Britain nearing its peak in early 1934, protest erupted in the Gold Coast over a proposed extension of the criminal code targeting seditious materials. First instituted in Nigeria by Governor Graeme Thomson in 1929, “sedition ordinances” banned a variety of “suspect” publications, including the *Negro Worker* and other left-wing periodicals, in most British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean by the late 1930s. With the full backing of the conservative secretary of state for the colonies Philip Cunliffe-Lister (Lord Swinton), Governor Shenton Thomas instituted the Gold Coast Criminal Code Amendment Ordinance No. 21 on March 31, 1934, which mimicked the Nigerian ordinance, in what the government had characterized as a model colony. The move appalled defenders of free speech

in Britain and the Gold Coast. The Fabian Society and the newly formed National Council of Civil Liberties (NCCL) took up the issue. Two separate delegations made the journey from the Gold Coast to London to protest the sedition ordinance and a new Waterworks Bill in mid-1934. One of the most powerful native rulers in the colony, Nana Ofori Atta, led the main delegation, known as the Gold Coast and Asante Delegation; Danquah, his brother and the editor of the *Times of West Africa*, served as its secretary. The second delegation consisted of the former secretary of the NCBWA Samuel R. Wood and George E. Moore, representing a group of younger, more vocal critics of the government in the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society (ARPS). The two delegations brought similar petitions opposing the bills and calling for an elected unofficial majority in the Legislative Council. The secretary of state and colonial office refused to give either a hearing, and the new legislation went into effect later that year.

To black intellectuals in London, these actions seemed part of a concerted effort to silence the colonial intelligentsia and buttress autocracy across the non-European empire. The WASU had protested first the imposition and then the revision of the Nigerian sedition ordinance. The arrival of the two Gold Coast delegations strengthened ties between London-based black organizations and resistance movements in West Africa, enhancing the groups' prestige in the colonies while amplifying the effects of the latter. Both the WASU and LCP held receptions for the Gold Coast and Asante Delegation and wrote letters to the Colonial Office and members of Parliament on their behalf.⁶¹ Nana Ofori Atta, who had been a patron of the WASU since the late 1920s, sat with members for a group photo, graphically illustrating unity between a prominent "traditional" ruler and the African students and intellectuals in the union, and he spoke at a league conference on "the negro in the world today." In an article in *The Keys*, the Nigerian Louis Nwachukwu Mbanefo, who was also a WASU member, compared recalcitrant local publishers and critics of the colonialism in West Africa to Thomas Paine and William Cobbett. Efforts in support of the ARPS representatives Wood and Moore continued well into 1935, and after a series of meetings organized by the WASU, NCCL, and LAI, the Colonial Office finally granted Wood and Moore an interview. Danquah, Wood, and Moore remained in London for several years, and despite their differences, all three joined Amy Ashwood Garvey and C. L. R. James's International African Friends of Ethiopia; Wood and Moore also served on the executive committee of its successor, the International African Service Bureau.⁶²

The agitation on behalf of the Gold Coast delegations in Britain was, as Derrick notes, “among the biggest anti-colonial lobbying efforts in the 1930s.” The NCCL saw the sedition ordinances as “symptomatic” of an “increasing repressive tendency” as observable at home as in the colonies.⁶³ Its leadership left unquestioned the assumption that true British ideals were democratic and color-blind. Black critics, by contrast, viewed the legislation as symptomatic of a uniquely imperial problem—the undemocratic foundations of the colonial state—and used the issue of censorship in the colonies to highlight the deepening racial divide within the empire. Writing in *The Keys*, Danquah maintained that “now it is clear every Governor in a Crown Colony cannot stand one step below the greatest autocrats of the world.” He cited a sequence of recent developments suggesting that the empire was increasingly a bifurcated entity, divided between, on the one hand, white populations in Britain and the dominions, which enjoyed the rights of democratic citizenship, and, on the other, the millions of non-Europeans subjected to increasingly extreme forms of control and exploitation. The Statute of Westminster, Danquah argued, “which . . . substituted for it [the second British Empire] a ghostly entity called the British Commonwealth of Nations, . . . led to a greater tightening of Imperial control over the Colonies, born of a dread that . . . the red and white yolk of Empire would slip from their hands.”⁶⁴ Far from supporting the progressive development of democratic civil society and self-government, Britain employed force to stamp out organic expressions of them. Connecting the plight of the Scottsboro defendants, violence and suppression of dissent in the colonies, and their local struggles against racism in the city, the Africans and Afro-Caribbeans drew attention to an increasingly stark color line within and beyond the British Empire.

AN “AFRICAN HOME” IN THE METROPOLIS

During the flurry of activity related to Scottsboro and the sedition ordinances, a new controversy developed over competing attempts to establish a place for people of African descent in London. Within the context of these broader campaigns, the effort to maintain a social center and hostel assumed symbolic as well as practical significance as a battle for freedom of action and city space. Protest against Colonial Office interference rippled through overlapping networks of black activists and leftist groups.

The goal of creating a hostel for people of African descent was not new. The black Liverpoolian and politician John R. Archer established the African Progress Union (APU) in London at the end of the Great War. A fixture in local left-wing politics, he had been elected the mayor of Battersea in 1913, making him the first black mayor in Britain. In the years that followed, Archer became a dedicated pan-Africanist, a member of the United Irish League (a gesture of allegiance to his mother's side of the family), and a major supporter of Shapurji Saklatvala, the first Communist MP in the House of Commons. Archer acted as the APU's president from its founding in 1918 until 1921, when the physician John Alcindor succeeded him following an internal shake-up. The group's constitution included the goals of establishing a "'Home from home,' where the members of the Association may meet for social recreation and intellectual improvement" and maintaining "a magazine or other publications . . . to promote the general advancement of African Peoples."⁶⁵ A few years later, Solanke and Ashwood Garvey proposed opening a hostel in London under the NPU's management not only to fill a pressing need but also to serve as a site of knowledge production and a demonstration of Africans' capacity for self-government. Like the APU and NPU before them, both the WASU and LCP sought to establish a residence and social space in the city.

Publishing *Wāsù* initially consumed the bulk of the WASU's limited resources, so its campaign for the creation of a hostel did not begin in earnest until 1927. Solanke proposed a cooperative scheme to the Colonial Office whereby the colonial governments of West Africa would fund a hostel for African students. Some officials in London seemed receptive to the idea, especially after the difficult time they had securing housing for African visitors during Wembley, but most within the Colonial Office and their colleagues in the colonies rejected it as a needless expense. Left to its own devices, the WASU initiated an independent fund-raising campaign. In "An Appeal—Need for a Central Home in London for African Students," Solanke described the proposed venture as an "'African home' in London, the management of which should be chiefly in the hands of the Africans themselves," and citing the example of the Indian hostel's influence on "the heterogeneous tribes of India to-day," he stressed the hostel's potential for fostering African unity.⁶⁶ The WASU occupied a house in West Kensington for a year in 1928 after Marcus Garvey secretly transferred the lease to them.⁶⁷ The following year, Solanke set out for West Africa to raise funds for a more permanent home. During his three-year absence, he cultivated stakeholders

among local rulers and the coastal colonial elite, and started twenty new branches of the WASU in British West Africa and one in the Belgian Congo, where the British Leverhulme conglomerate operated with a virtual free hand.⁶⁸

While keeping a close watch on Solanke's movements, the Colonial Office seized the opportunity to expand its oversight of student sojourners through a seemingly benevolent gesture. Major Hanns Vischer, secretary-general of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures and a former director of education in Northern Nigeria, organized a committee including Dr. Moody to develop plans for a small social club and hostel. When he returned to London, Solanke found the union riven by internal divisions and financial problems that forced the group to stop publishing its journal for a time. Perceiving Vischer's initiative as a deliberate attempt to exclude the WASU, he publicly opposed the committee's scheme.

In the face of this new threat, the union closed ranks and moved forward with its plans. The WASU rented a house at 62 Camden Road on January 1, 1933. Over the next few months, the Nigerian Opeolu ('Olu) Obisanya, Solanke's soon-to-be wife, transformed the large house into a comfortable "home from home," and the hostel accepted its first guest, Prince Ademola, in early March. Vischer and Moody visited the hostel soon after it opened, and *Wàsù* reported that the LCP's president "burst into a hearty congratulation for . . . this great monument."⁶⁹ The WASU's hostel and headquarters became a point of entry into the city for African students and numerous other visitors, as well as a popular rendezvous for London's black residents. It served as a site for the exchange of ideas among black intellectuals from around the Atlantic, and like the union's journal, it became a space for the performance of a modern but distinctive Africanness. The hostel's facilities were open to anyone of African descent, not just members or West African students, and overnight or short-term lodgers included African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and prominent African visitors. By staying at the WASU hostel, even for a short period of time, new arrivals entered the subculture of black sojourners and migrants in the imperial metropolis. The Guyanese T. Ras Makonnen remembered the hostel as "much more of a social outlet, for WASU House was a homely place where you could always get your groundnut chop, and there would always be dances on Saturday night."⁷⁰ The future president of Nigeria Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, who studied in the United States and spent several weeks in London on his way back to West Africa to edit the *West African Pilot*, stressed its significance as a clearinghouse of news

and ideas. It was, he recalled, “the headquarters of most West African students in London, where we congregated and devoured West African newspapers. I also had the pleasure of giving a series of talks to the students there.”⁷¹ The union also hosted officials in the Colonial Office, members of Parliament, and colonial experts, providing a rare setting in which African intellectuals could engage them in substantive debate. It was through the WASU that many future political leaders in West Africa first met the British politicians and colonial administrators who would one day hand over the reins of the colonial state.

Everyday life at the hostel became part of the union’s struggle against racist portrayals of Africans and colonialism. *Wàsù* featured photographs of both the exterior and interior of the house, as well as group photographs of members and various important “friends” in which the former appeared in fashionable dress, presenting a picture of refinement and respectability. While emphasizing the unique contributions of African culture, pictorial and narrative depictions of the hostel adhered to middle-class British notions regarding the proper ordering of domestic life, particularly in terms of prescribed gender roles and sexual behavior. Group shots invariably featured ‘Olu Solanke seated beside the group’s guest in the center of the frame. Management of the hostel reflected the patriarchal organization of the middle-class home, complete with a married couple as “warden” and “matron” (usually Ladipo and ‘Olu Solanke). The WASU constitution prohibited “non-residents” from entering the “residential quarters of the hostel without permission of the Warden” and “opposite sexes other than a husband and his wife” from either entering or remaining “together in any of the BEDROOMS.” “Admission to girl students as residents” was dependent upon “the Warden’s wife or a Matron being also resident at the Hostel, at the same time.”⁷² The WASU’s founders consisted exclusively of men. As small numbers of African women joined the union thereafter, their gender continued to limit their influence in the group and even access to its hostel.

Nevertheless, in the mid-1930s, West African women, including many of the first African women to earn professional degrees in Britain, became a prominent and vocal presence within the union. Women members supplied important organizational labor, often filling the post of librarian or treasurer, contributed to its journal, and were instrumental in spreading the WASU’s message beyond London to West Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States (activities discussed further in chapter 3).⁷³ Ironically, given that boarding at the hostel was not an option for most, women arguably had the greatest

impact by building the WASU House into a center of black cultural and social life in London. In 1935, 'Olu Solanke, Ibidun Doherty, Victoria Omolara Bucknor, Irene Howe, Mrs. G. Nigretti, and 'Remi Ademola formed a "social committee" that organized and hosted regular dances and concerts, where a diverse mix of people mingled and danced to gramophone records or live performances. "Over fifty, irrespective of class, colour or creed, attended" the WASU's first social on September 14, 1935, including several prominent Afro-Caribbeans, such as the famous cricketer Learie Constantine, his wife, Norma Constantine, and H. O. Beresford Wooding, a barrister and the first new Caribbean member of the WASU since 1926. A varied cast of musicians performed a mix of black Atlantic styles, from the jazz and rumba to guitar-based West African palm-wine and highlife music popular in port cities up and down the coast. Besides entertainment, the social boasted a buffet of "tasty refreshments and other delicacies" prepared by Howe.⁷⁴ Operating within gendered constraints, WASU women used the social committee to carve out a semiautonomous space for themselves within the organization and created a setting where Africans and others of African descent in London enacted black internationalist solidarity through cultural expression and sociability, as much over a spicy rice dish and on the dance floor as through political organizing. Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Sierra Leonean women, including new arrivals Tinuade Adefolu, Adenrele Ademola (the daughter of Alake Alaiyeluwa Ademola II and Prince Ademola's sister), and Titilola Folarin (the daughter of the prominent barrister Adebisin Folarin), continued to direct the social committee into the late 1930s, but women members remained excluded from the top positions on the WASU's executive committee until the war years.

The WASU aimed to "present to the world a true picture of African life and philosophy," to "promote the spirit of self-help" and unity, and to foster "inter-racial understanding." The WASU House and *Wàsù* became related instruments for achieving these goals and demonstrated the fallacy of popular representations of African backwardness. As a functioning display of African initiative and intelligence, the hostel was the WASU's most consistent argument for self-government and colonial reform.

With Moody as the public face of the project, Vischer's committee moved forward with funds provided by the colonial governments in West Africa and the Caribbean, philanthropic and religious organizations in Britain, and several commercial firms with significant interests in the colonies. In October 1934, "Aggrey House," named in honor of the recently deceased educator from

the Gold Coast Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey, began accepting members, and the space became fully operational in early 1935. Of its fifty members, roughly half were West African; the remainder consisted of Afro-Caribbeans and a few South and East Africans. The WASU's publicity onslaught against Aggrey House scheme began in the spring of 1934. Although they criticized Moody for his involvement, Solanke and the union focused the brunt of their attack on the Colonial Office, which they accused of attempting to establish indirect rule over Africans in London. They published a pamphlet by Solanke titled "The Truth about Aggrey House: Government Plan for Control of African Students." "The British Government which has absolute control over the lives of these peoples in their native lands," he charged, "has deemed it fit to seek a plan whereby it might exercise the same control over those studying in England." Linking Aggrey House to government "oppression" in the colonies and the "indignity" of racism in Britain, he appealed "to every lover of freedom to help us check this scheme of Imperialism which would strangle the very thought of its subjects and control their every action and opinion." The defense of WASU House was "a necessary preliminary to the greater independence."⁷⁵ In "The Year End Open Letter to the Educated Youths in West Africa" from January 1935, Solanke compared Aggrey House to the "system of Indirect Rule," and an editorial in *Wasu* urged: "It is not enough for us to fight in the colonies for freedom. It is of the utmost importance that in the heart of the Empire we own and man a Hostel which will fight our cause *on the spot* and give the lie to traducers of the race whenever they say that we have not the capacity to manage our own affairs. It is for this reason that the white man of the imperialist school is doing his utmost to ruin the movement."⁷⁶ The LAI backed the WASU's position in the dispute over Aggrey House, which it characterized as a medium for "imperial propaganda." The same month that "The Truth about Aggrey House" appeared, the WASU held a protest meeting in which representatives of the LAI, NCCL, NWA, and Society of Friends took part. The participants declared a boycott of Aggrey House and formed the Africa House Defence Committee, which included the countess of Warwick as its president, the journalist Kingsley Martin, Julian Huxley, Norman Leys, and William M. Macmillan.⁷⁷ Writing in the *Negro Worker*, Padmore demonized the Colonial Office's attempt to "set up a little Jim-Crow hostel" in London and endorsed the WASU hostel.⁷⁸ In the months and years that followed, the union relentlessly challenged the notion that Aggrey House addressed the needs of African students in London, but Solanke continued to seek recognition and financial support from the parties behind the scheme.

The WASU hostel at 62 Camden Road hosted more than 160 guests, but by the end of 1936, it was clear that the group could not sustain the financial burden of rent on its current location. *Wású* did not appear in 1938 and 1939, but reemerged with a new format the following year. Solanke repeatedly requested Vischer's assistance with obtaining support from the West African governments and began courting John Harris, head of the Committee for the Welfare of Africans in Europe (CWAE). His persistence and fear that the controversy would push the WASU further toward the radical left led Hanns Vischer to appeal within the Colonial Office for subtle intervention in the form of assistance with fund-raising. He suggested that a form of benevolent paternalism vis-à-vis the WASU would give the government at least some hope of channeling members' energies into more moderate outlets and cited the pacifying influence of Aggrey House on those who joined it. "I have often seen Kenyatta Johnstone there meek and mild and very happy," he wrote, "and I am sure that the influence of Aggrey House on him and other wild lads from Africa . . . cannot be overestimated." While in London for the coronation in 1937, the Alake of Abeokuta arranged a meeting between Harris and representatives of the WASU at which it was agreed that the CWAE would lend the group £750 to purchase a new home. The Alake contributed an additional £100. Vischer ultimately prevailed within the Colonial Office, and the same year, the union received the first annual grant of £250 from the Nigerian government for the maintenance of its hostel. This represented only a partial victory given that the WASU had solicited funds—and the recognition they implied—from all four of Britain's West Africa colonies; two years later, the Gold Coast awarded the group a onetime grant of £100. Nevertheless, after an intensive appeal campaign, aided by Vischer and Harris, the WASU hostel fund grew to £1,500 by 1938, making the CWAE loan unnecessary, and the group acquired a freehold property on Camden Square. Free from the burden of rent or mortgage payments, the WASU's finances improved dramatically, and the new hostel heightened the union's profile and secured, in physical form, recognition of the African presence in the imperial metropolis.⁷⁹

The WASU moved to 1 South Villas, Camden Square in mid-1938. The new hostel, which the members dubbed Africa House, had twelve beds, a café, a small library with a wide range of newspapers and books related to Africa and black history, and several recreational rooms for public lectures, debates, and other social events. Not only did women members continue to sustain the group financially, but it was largely through their labors that the

male-dominated WASU made its greatest mark on the cultural life of the city. After the union moved into the larger location in 1938, 'Olu Solanke ran a small restaurant where she and other WASU women served lodgers and outside patrons "Jolloff Rice" and other African dishes made with ingredients sourced through female relatives in Nigeria.⁸⁰ The popularity of the WASU's biweekly Saturday-night dances, where a diverse mix of "merry-makers" mingled and danced, grew steadily over the following decade, becoming an escalating source of income, and the group became more widely known for these events than for any of its other activities. Black musicians, both professional and amateur, frequently provided the music at these and other functions, and some became longtime members and engaged in the group's political activities. On rare occasions, the WASU hired professional dance bands like E. Child's Six Spirits of Swing, but the union usually relied on talent within its own ranks. Due to "these organised social, intellectual and spiritual functions," the WASU's annual report for 1938 declared, "'colour prejudice,' which is recently becoming rife in other parts of Great Britain, may now be considered as having died a natural death at the Hostel, . . . enabling the white and black subjects of His Majesty the King to look and treat one another as brethren and equal citizens of the same Empire and at the same time promoting the spirit of universal brotherhood among all the races."⁸¹ In addition to socials and dances, the union hosted receptions for visiting dignitaries and its annual WASU Day celebration, which involved more elaborate programs. The 1934 WASU Day festivities at St. Martin-in-the-Fields featured a program of traditional West African airs and melodies with piano accompaniment. The WASU celebrated the coronation of King George VI in 1937 with a dance featuring an orchestra led by O. A. Adeyin, and a *sákàrà* band, including singers, drummers, and a *goje* or fiddle player, provided the entertainment at a reception for the Alake of Abeokuta during his visit to London.⁸² The WASU feted Eslanda and Paul Robeson in 1935 in honor of their patronage of the group, and the members greeted them at the union's anniversary celebration the following year with a *sákàrà* band followed by a dance performance by a group of women members. The Nigerian jazz organist and composer Fela Sowande, who served, in effect, as the WASU's music director, was one of the African musicians Robeson encountered at the hostel. During the reception for the Robesons, he accompanied G. Biney (most likely J. Kwesi Biney) in an "African ceremonial air" and a program of "Negro spirituals" on piano.⁸³

The controversy over Aggrey House divided the WASU and LCP, as well as members from Nigeria and the Gold Coast within the union, and all but

one of the members from the latter country left it for a time. The dispute magnified the ever-present tensions between Afro-Caribbeans and Africans that expressions of unity glossed over but never exorcised entirely. In spite of the differences in the composition of their membership and the public dispute over Aggrey House, the two most enduring black pressure groups during the interwar period increasingly appealed to the same publics and shared a set of political and intellectual concerns—above all, racism, the place of Africa and people of African descent in world history, and unity and cooperation within and among large and diverse black and colonial populations. Although their members came to London from varying circumstances and approached these issues from different perspectives and sources, they often arrived at similar conclusions, in part because of their encounters and struggles in the imperial metropolis. The organizations' political goals were remarkably similar—namely, the promotion of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans “to positions of authority and trust” and “federation, self-government, . . . and economic development” in British West Africa and the Caribbean. In immediate political terms, the horizon of their black internationalism was largely coterminous with the boundaries of the empire, and in this sense, their members remained “British” in their self-presentation and political assertions. But for the members of both groups, these steps were prerequisites to fostering greater interracial understanding and a transformed social order on a global scale. The WASU's “nationalism” was, at base, fundamentally internationalist, articulating regional, continental, and pan-African registers of belonging. At the same time, its members insisted that their identities as black and African made them more, not less, suitable for the full measure of imperial citizenship, and they envisioned a reformed multiracial federation based on relations of equality in which a self-governing West Africa would take its rightful place. The union viewed its hostel, in Solanke's words, as “a miniature West African Federal State under the management of a miniature West African Federal authority popularly known as WASU.”⁸⁴ Africa House encouraged this political imaginary and its pan-African attachments by giving it quotidian substance. Due especially to the efforts of their women members, the WASU and LCP formed new spaces of interaction among people of African descent in London that were keys to their longevity and, ironically, platforms for their male leadership to mobilize universalist but fundamentally gendered ideals of citizenship with which to argue for representation within the British Empire on more equitable terms. As new crises emerged in the mid- to late 1930s, the tensions over Aggrey

House subsided, and it and WASU House developed into significant centers of black political activity.

. . .

In early July 1938, Lady Kathleen Simon, the Irish wife of the chancellor of the exchequer and stalwart of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society, presided over the official opening of Africa House. It was a momentous occasion for the union and, indeed, for black London. The WASU's annual report for 1938 described the hostel as an "important and purely-African institution," "the first of its kind in London and the first in the history of New Africa." Lady Simon's presence as the keynote speaker, acting as a representative of the CWAE, attests to the WASU's rising public stature in the years leading up to the war, but it also illustrates the connections—and ultimately the disconnect—between black activism and internationalist groups in Britain. Simon was a committed antislavery activist, a Scottsboro signatory, and an advocate of colonial reform. Besides the WASU, both she and Harris had ties to Padmore and Dr. Moody. Lady Simon's devotion to antislavery work colored her view of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict and later appeasement; like Harris, she attributed the Italo-Ethiopian war to slave raiding and slavery. In her address, she expressed admiration for W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, but she also declared, "We are glad to be British citizens and this Hostel is to help us be better citizens. The greatest thing about the British Empire is that it stands for equal citizenship." Her appearance at Africa House led to an interview with the Jamaican journalist Gwen Edwards during which she asserted "that only under European rule would Abyssinia be better off." She was more evasive on the subject of the recent disturbances in the Caribbean, stating that the "matter had to be judged on its own merits as the standard of living was different among the different peoples in the world." "The colored people will take their place in the world," she added, "but only by virtue of their own efforts." Simon saw no contradiction in asserting, on the one hand, the necessity of European stewardship, even at the expense of a fellow member of the League of Nations, and, on the other, that only the independent initiative of "colored people" could improve their lot within the British Empire. She simultaneously advanced an image of a color-blind empire based on equality and introduced cultural difference as a mitigating factor in access to wealth, political power, and social services.

As she spoke at Africa House, her husband, Sir John Simon, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, and the rest of the cabinet contemplated relinquishing African territories to placate Hitler's demand for colonies. As early as November 1937, citing the bloody record of German colonialism in Africa, the WASU passed a resolution stating in unequivocal terms that "we strongly protest against any . . . scheme whereby any portion . . . of African colonies, British, French or otherwise, shall be handed over now or at any future date, to Germany." In early December, the press reported John Harris's call for collective administration of former German colonies in Africa in place of rule by individual mandatory powers under the current League system. As Pennybacker observes, his and the WASU's "positions were directly counterposed."⁸⁵ The circumstances surrounding the opening of Africa House provide a glimpse into the complex and often-contradictory relationship between black activist-intellectuals and their white allies, between anti-imperialism and antifascism, as the decade progressed.

In a final twist that again exposed the way imperial interests and racial paternalism undermined the potential for cooperation, the WASU immediately entered into a protracted dispute with Harris and the CWAE over ownership of its new home. The CWAE and WASU had agreed that the former would hold the property in "nominal trust," while the union retained the exclusive power to nominate the non-African trustees and to oversee the day-to-day management of the hostel. The WASU rejected the initial draft of the trust deed, which "gave the Trustees very wide powers of control of W.A.S.U." As with the earlier controversy over Aggrey House, union members believed that assistance seemingly offered in the spirit of cross-cultural, interracial cooperation merely cloaked a scheme to limit their autonomy and freedom of expression. The two sides negotiated a compromise, and four representatives of the union agreed verbally to a revised draft. However, the WASU never received the new version, and the dispute remained unresolved well into the following decade, even after Harris's death in 1940. By the time Solanke finally agreed to pay £500 toward the £800 mortgage on the hostel to have ownership transferred to the WASU in 1944, plans for the opening of another, much larger hostel at Chelsea Embankment in southwest London preoccupied the group.⁸⁶