seven months after the end of the First World War, a writer for a Sierra Leonean newspaper reflected on how “the multi-fold and complex parts of the grand machinery that is to control the movements of the ‘world to be’” were “being fitted up” by the war’s victors in Paris. Excluded from the Paris Peace Conference, a group seeking to represent the interests of Africans and those of African descent had held its own conference in the same city—the Pan-African Congress—to try to influence this process of worldly reorganization. “It needs no saying,” continued the Sierra Leonean writer, extending the mechanistic metaphor,

that the Resolutions passed by the [Pan-African] Congress, on behalf of the 200,000,000 Negros [sic] of the world . . . are, from the Negro’s point of view, further parts that are to be adjusted to that machinery in order to give added placidity to the movements of the reconstructed world.
Thinking on the scale of the world was not unusual in interwar Sierra Leone. Journalists and editorialists regularly looked beyond what they called “our own small corner” of the world, especially where “the future of the black races” was concerned. They commonly observed that the “natives of West Africa have entered into the whirl of the wheels of the world’s progress,” as one editorialist put it in 1919. But this entry into the world had confronted Africans with a problem. While they had become more confident that “there is no reason why they should not enjoy the world as other people,” they had also been forced to see that “the race barrier is being erected everywhere” and that “at no time has white prejudice against the African been more keen than at present.”

These depictions of a world-spanning political machinery were written in a small West African city under British colonial rule. Yet they were reflective of widespread efforts across the Black Atlantic to understand politics in global perspective. If some traditions of Black writing dating back to the 1880s had already set their sights on the “entire global system,” as Robin D. G. Kelley has shown, a wide-angle focus came to dominate Black Atlantic political thought during the 1920s and 1930s. Across the print circuits of the Atlantic emerged a shared sense among Black writers that, as the Gold Coast Leader put it in 1919, “there is a greater world, a greater force, beyond us, which is shaping our destiny.” The Caribbean-born, Harlem-based autodidact and activist Hubert Harrison, writing the same year, insisted that “the Negroes of the Western World” needed to “acquaint themselves with what is taking place in the larger world” since “our problem here is really a part of a great world-wide problem.”

A sense of hopefulness and even exhilaration at the shrinking of the world was common in newspapers of the Black Atlantic. Journalists and editors exclaimed that “the world is now an open world—absolutely open.” They declared that the “narrow patriotism of past days is fast vanishing,” looked forward to the “unity of the entire human race,”
and marveled at how “distance is being annihilated and contact between men of different nationalities is on the increase.” “After all,” explained the *Gold Coast Leader* in 1927, “humanity is one, and the world has contracted tremendously. The weak are coming together more and more, if not physically, in sentiment and common understanding, and the latter is more powerful in the affairs of men than armies and fleets. The cry of a contracted world is for liberty and justice.”

But the history of this way of thinking about the world has fallen from view in recent years. It has become harder to think about globality without remembering its complicity in the colonial drive for omniscience. Though virtually all human cultures have produced depictions of the whole world, those that rose to dominance in the modern era conceptualized the world in order to rule it. That vision of globality was imperial in both origin and effect, sweeping away diverse cosmologies. It was the basis of capitalism, a restless system operating on a “constantly extending scale.” And it was tied to a human drive for environmental supremacy whose destructiveness is now everywhere apparent. Yet if there are good reasons to see globality in terms of the mastering gaze of the Apollonian eye—*urbs et orbis terrarium*, the pacified universal empire imagined by Augustinian Rome—this is only a partial view. It misses in particular the existence of a “surreptitious counter-narrative” of the world that has quietly followed in the wake of its dominant counterpart.

This book is an attempt to come to terms with the idea of the world across interwar cultures of Black Atlantic internationalism and nationalism. It focuses on an archive of English- and French-language anticolonial writing produced by Black writers in France, the United States, and West Africa. As the exclusion of the Pan-African Congress delegation from the Paris Peace Conference suggests, much of the world’s population was not expected to participate in the business of planetary reorganization. But many Black intellectuals rejected the notion that the domain of the global was restricted to an imperial elite. They saw a
theory of global order as necessary for the liberation of Africa and its scattered diasporas. By thinking on the scale of the world, they developed a distinct strategy for considering the problem of imperial rule. This was a connective, comparative, and relational approach. It was resolutely antiprovincial. It was skeptical of claims to national or imperial uniqueness. It challenged received wisdom on boundaries by insisting on seeing individuals, groups, nations, regions, and empires in planetary perspective. In this way, it sought to rectify imperialism’s cartographical lopsidedness: “that it is always the natives who don’t have the maps,” as Edward Said pointed out, “and the white people who do.”

The most pressing reason to think on the scale of the world was to comprehend—in order to resist—the formidable power of race, the principal ideology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism. Simultaneously ideology and structure, race operated in starkly temporal ways. To be racialized was to be sealed in the past, alienated from the present, written out of the future, or seen as always slipping back to a prehistoric state. Since the idea of race was premised on a totalizing classification of all of humanity, this temporal matrix mapped spatially onto the whole world. Joining the colonized individual to the world through race—an immobilization in both space and time—was essential to imperial power. Anticolonial thought sought at bottom to escape the spatial and temporal fixities of imperial discourse. For that to happen, the world had to be articulated as the scale on which the politics of race was premised.

By thinking about the world from the perspective of pan-African liberation, Black writers illuminated the hierarchies of race that did not simply exist on a global scale but in an important sense produced that very scale. Operating in a constitutive relationship with the national and imperial units of political organization into which the planet was divided, race emerged in this view as a deleterious but cohesive form of global cohesion. Race hierarchically stabilized a restless and changing world, protecting the spoils of the planet’s original bifurcation. In the
process, it revealed the interpenetration of scales, from the imperial to the global, which may have seemed opposed to one other, but which actually produced one another. By seizing upon and subverting pro-imperial globalisms, Black writers did not only conjure a critique of the world. They also indicated a method for understanding oneself as political in relation to the world. It was only by accessing the scale of the global, they suggested, that race could be grasped and turned against itself. The conjugation of the world thus provided a route to conceptualizing race as the basis for political action—allowing people to “occupy the discursive site of injury,” in Judith Butler’s formulation—without necessarily creating an essentialized or naturalized identity. Yet by the same token, where the world slipped from view, or was lost or obscured, counterreadings of race could come to resemble dominant narratives.

Reflecting on the imprint of the globe on the racialized body, Black anticolonial writers produced an archive about the implication of the individual in matrices of power. Their insights on this question, which focused in particular on the eliminatory drive of colonial sovereignty with respect to the colonized body—rendered peripheral, trapped and isolated by its interpellation as “native”—hint at a fascinating and underappreciated prefiguration of later attempts to connect experiences of embodied oppression to world-scale processes. Black interwar writers suggested, in different ways and often through fiction and poetry as well as directly political writing, that intimate experiences of race—what Fanon would later refer to as “epidermalization”—were fundamentally bound up with planetary processes. This meant that the ideological work of anticolonialism, even when it took as its referent the individual, could be achieved only on the scale of the world. And, by the same token, the assault on the anticolonial project began here, ranged against its imagined worlds.

*World* can mean many things. My usage is primarily literal: the *whole* world and its encompassing scale, which Lefebvre called “l’échelle
I use both global and planetary while recognizing that a distinction is often made between the two, in which the global—a knowable, rational, Apollonian sphere—is contrasted with the planetary: “an unfamiliar place riddled with eerie, destructive, and menacing forces.” In light of the inexorable rise of the concept of the planetary and its associated climate-related crises, some theorists have gone as far as suggesting that “the age of the global as such is ending.” Yet our current planetary predicament is precisely what should draw our attention to countercurrents of global thought. In an era of limited hope, the history of alternative globalities offers a route towards rethinking the problem of human agency on the scale of the world.

As a product of the interwar era, the anticolonial thought I examine saw the space of the world in ways concordant with the rationalist optimism of the global. Yet as a critique of the dominant trends of that era, it also hinted at a conception of the planetary lying beyond the control of that vision. Katherine McKittrick has shown that, despite the richness of articulations of space in cultures of the Black Atlantic, Blackness itself has typically been represented in scholarship as “ungeographic”—somewhere that space acts, but which is not itself able to produce and theorize space. In response, McKittrick proposes a “black sense of place,” rightly insisting that Black subjects are not only captured by space but also participate in its production. Black interwar writing shows that a “black sense of place” included a sense of the whole world: a body of global thought that was articulated by journalists, politicians, writers, poets, novelists, travelers, anticolonial militants, historians, and scholars, living and moving across the Black Atlantic, and constituting a vibrant “thought zone” of the late colonial world.

No single approach to the question of space was evinced by Black anticolonial intellectuals. But the body of writing they produced shows that, like others in colonized territories, they were intensely preoccupied with the question of understanding politics on the scale of the world. This archive challenges some of the periodizations with which
we have become familiar. Contrary to what has become common wisdom, for example, structuralist thinking on the scale of the world was not imported to Africa from Latin America during the late 1960s, but was already a feature of political discourse in West Africa during the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, the idea of a “world-system” may derive from scholarship produced during the late 1960s by scholars grappling with the way exploitation took place on a world scale—Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, Giovanni Arrighi, and, especially, Immanuel Wallerstein. But that writing did not emerge in a vacuum and did not simply exist in relation to a narrowly defined Marxist tradition. Anticolonial writing, including that which was produced across the Black Atlantic, represents part of the submerged history of such thought—submerged, in part, because it was rarely compiled or systematized and has since languished in the colonial archives.

Voluminous and sophisticated theorizations of scale have been produced by geographers since the mid-1980s, when the concept was wrested from its cartographic fixity and transformed into a movable object. Peter Taylor’s pioneering work placed scales into a hierarchy based on Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis. But in myriad challenges to Taylor’s schema, scale became a “troubling and even chaotic concept”, increasingly difficult to systematize, and construed variously as nested, flexible, irresolvable, or discursive. Some theoreticians went as far as suggesting that we “expurgate scale” from our vocabulary. Though I cannot do justice in this book to the abundance and complexity of these debates, I seek to intervene in the theorization of scale in two particular ways. First, by developing an understanding of scale via texts in the history of Black anticolonial thought, my aim is to add texture to a conceptual tableau that has often been flatly abstract. Theories of scale have been largely disconnected from the history of scalar thinking—especially from “below,” in understudied texts and traditions. Second, by drawing on this tradition of what we might call underground scalar thought, I challenge a binary division that has
counterposed the scale of the global to the scale of the body. In this view, the insistently wide-angle and stratospheric focus of a global analysis is a “conceit in which only some can luxuriate”: a perspective that devalues the positional and embodied forms of scalar knowledge of nonprivileged actors. This retreat from the global has taken different forms—Foucauldian, postcolonial, feminist, posthuman—but usually has at its root an epistemological suspicion of the perspective of the observer who claims to be able see at once the whole world. “Where are you when you are looking at a globe, when you look at the world as a sphere?” asks Bruno Latour. “Do you believe in God or something?”

I offer in this book a set of scalar perspectives at once embodied and global, thus questioning the notion that positioned critique is antithetical to the planetary. By extension, I also confront another idea that has become common in geographic writing: that scales can never be prioritized. “The theoretical and political priority therefore resides never in a particular geographical scale,” writes Swyngedouw paradigmatically, “but rather in the process through which particular scales become constituted and subsequently transformed.” This jettisoning of the very possibility of the prioritization of scale rests, I contend, on a theoretical perspective that pays insufficient attention to the history of scalar thought. Black Atlantic anticolonial thought often prioritized the scale of the world—not at the expense or exclusion of other scales, but in the face of the relentlessly provincializing discourses of colonial rule.

By recognizing scale as the basis of anticolonial thought, we can reconsider the close but apparently paradoxical relationship between nationalism and internationalism. Rigid models of political thought have found it difficult to appreciate this interrelationship. Seeing nationalism narrowly as a doctrine or ideology, they have failed to account for what Perry Anderson calls “the overpowering dimension of collective meaning” involved in nationalisms of various types. And instrumentalist accounts of decolonization, which focus on the strug-
gle between colonial authorities and local elites for state capture, evacuate anticolonialism of its global aspirations. In fact, both imperial and anticolonial nationalisms were animated by large-scale visions that extended far beyond any single nation. European nationalisms had long been concomitant with pan-national projects seeking world transformation. And Black Atlantic nationalisms were also, as Adom Getachew has recently argued, world-encompassing projects. Proponents of pan-African unity were often vague on the institutional configurations that would achieve their goals. This would become a prominent criticism in the postcolonial era. Yet Black writing of the interwar period reveals that ambivalence about the nation was usually derived from an unwillingness to posit too firmly a set of political boundaries, given the unstable, protean, and mobile threat of racialization.

Those writing about the African diaspora have rightly, in recent decades, stressed process over ontology. Diaspora, they have argued, is articulated with other projects, identities, aesthetics, and desires; it is constantly in production rather than a fixed reality; and it is best understood not as rooted in specific territories, but as “diaspora-in-the-making” that takes place against an inescapably global backdrop. Yet typically, both sides of the equation have not received equal treatment: diaspora has overshadowed the world in which it is produced. My suggestion in this book is that we consider how diaspora produces globality and not only how globality produces diaspora.

THE NON-APOLLONIAN GAZE: ANTICOLONIAL VISIONS OF THE WORLD

In his genealogy of the earth in the Western imagination, the geographer Denis Cosgrove identifies globality with the “Apollonian gaze”: a mastering vision that imagines itself above and beyond the planet. At these heights it is able to map the world’s surface using attributes it
believes itself uniquely to possess—universality, rationality, objectivity. In its political form, the Apollonian gaze claims divine authority for the spread of a universal empire across the surface of the earth. It was already implicit in the imperialism of ancient Greece, when Alexander’s conquests were associated with a cartographic understanding of the globe. And in Augustinian Rome it expanded into the notion of *urbs et orbis terrarium*, “city and earthly globe.” The earthly order of the emperor became inseparable from the celestial order of Apollo. The globe, which now appeared on Roman coins, forged a link between divine and terrestrial realms. For imperial ambition it offered a limitless and legitimating cartography.

Historians of sixteenth-century Europe have shown how the “discovery” of continents to the west provoked a new understanding of the earth’s extent and habitability. Formerly perceived barriers were dissolved. But in the tradition of the Apollonian gaze, an expanded view of the globe came with unprecedented colonial violence. The military victories of Western powers in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Australasia, and the Pacific islands depended for their success on “a global knowledge of the world in its entirety,” which contrasted with the relative isolation of non-Western cultures. Scholars of international relations have seen these victories as culminating in the creation of the first truly global international system, able to actualize in scope what previous societies had only imagined. Conceptions of global governance and the “global state” articulated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflected a novel capacity to exert control over the world, even if this power was never as total as was claimed.

A historian describes this process of mapping the globe and exerting power over it as “nothing less than the human taking possession of the planet.” But we must immediately recognize that the possessing “human” here is partial, or what Sylvia Wynter pertinently calls an “ethnoclass” that “overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.” For those who were not included in its vision of the “human,” globali-
ty’s controlling gaze could be disastrous. In one of his last essays, Foucault insisted that we turn away “from all projects that claim to be global or radical,” because the optimism lying beneath such projects had shown itself to be the basis of yet more dangerous forms of power. Others have pointed to the clear association between prevailing imperial visions of the world and the idea of race, which stratifies the diverse populations of a knowable world the better to subject them to colonial rule. The global becomes, in this reading, primarily a category of racial domination. It is an “onto-epistemological horizon instituted by racial-ity.” It is the space produced by imperial difference. It gives rise to “globalcentrism,” a deterritorialized idea of world politics that masks the endurance of Western power. And it is loaded with a panoply of oppressions, which can be undone only through the reinscription of alternative systems of thought, particularly those that were violently subdued—but not wholly defeated—during the period of colonial rule.

There is no denying the strength of these critiques of globality. By excavating its genealogy and exposing its concomitance with the imperial vision, they destabilize the commonsense idea that the global can be understood as a neutral space. Like other scales, they show, the global is produced, in specific ways and alongside the exercise of certain forms of power. In this way, they recall Lefebvre’s defamiliarization of space in general:

If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be “purely” formal, the essence of rational abstraction, it is precisely because this space has already been occupied and planned, already the focus of past strategies, of which we cannot always find traces.

But there is no automatic route from a recognition of globality’s uneven production to a position that the editors of one volume aptly call a “horrified recoil from any hint of panopticism.” In this book, I try to show why Black anticolonial thinkers did not generally undertake the
stark gestures of worldly rejection that have since become common in critical writing. Neither did they seek escape routes from the Apollonian gaze in precolonial cultural formations. These intellectuals certainly looked to epistemologies that had been attacked and undervalued by European imperialism. Yet their opposition to a dominating globality was not built on the straightforward recuperation of these alternative ways of thinking. In a manner reminiscent of Césaire’s later dismissal of reactionary anticolonialism in *Discourse on Colonialism*, they did not seek “to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond.” To this aim, they conceptualized the planet in relation to the omniscient globality of imperial discourse. Anticolonial worlds were subversively adapted from the grammar of domination.

A narrative of the world can embody a distinctive theoretical outlook at the same time as it borrows creatively from other sources. Dominant globalities can, as Bruce Robbins suggests, be “manhandled or refunctioned.” To appreciate this, we need to pay close attention to form and process. Not only do the multiplicity of “visions of globality across time and space” demand our attention, but so do the unequal relationships between these visions. This means moving away from the idea of seemingly separate intellectual lineages and towards what Edward Said called a “surreptitious counter-narrative”—a product of the violent and unequal encounter between the spatial imagination of European imperialism and its subject peoples. Writing about the ubiquity of racism in the contemporary world, Achille Mbembe insists that, regardless of the desire to erect new walls and borders, Europe will never again be “monocolored”:

In other words, never again will there be (if it ever was the case) a unique centre of the world. From now on, the world will be conjugated in the plural. It will be lived in the plural, and absolutely nothing can be done to reverse this condition, which is as irreversible as it is irrevocable.

We are familiar with the grammatical rule that verbs are conjugated and nouns are declined. In a literal sense, the idea of conjugating the
world is simply incorrect. But looked at closely, Mbembe’s formulation is suggestive. It blurs the distinction between world as a noun and worlding as a verb, reminding us of the “world” in traditions of post-Kantian philosophy—the environment that a spirit-possessing being is able to transform. To “conjugate” is also to make a verb agree with the other components of a sentence: to find the correct form of the verb for a grammatical phrase. The sense, then, is not one of complete invention but one of contextualization and adaptation. At the same time, “conjugate” carries the sense of joining two separate things together in a union without combining them (“conjugal,” for example), which is very close to the meaning of “articulate” as linking or joining. Like the concept of articulation, conjugation focuses our attention on the conditions under which discursive unities are temporarily achieved.

Finally, going back to the Latin congiurare—to band together, to swear an oath—also gives us the English “conjure”: to summon, imagine, or make something appear, as if by magic or apparition.

In Black interwar political writing, the world was conjugated in the multiple senses of the term: it was the product of an encounter; it helped to configure transient unities of purpose and identity; and it was adapted, neither derivative nor singular. To think about anticolonial worlds in this way is to consider their tensely productive relationship with dominant forms. Interwar cultures of the Black Atlantic engaged critically and formatively with the discourses of the White Atlantic. This process of counterreading and juxtaposition was not an incidental methodology, irrelevant to the final theoretical product. It was manifested in the theory itself. Conjugation allows us to think of this process as itself a form of political theory and practice: a way of seizing and subverting powerful discourses without simply reproducing them. Contestatory models of the world could thus be constructed partly through a reading of dominant visions.

As an example of conjugation, consider Hubert Harrison, the Caribbean-born militant, who lived in New York from 1900 until his death in
1927. Just after the First World War, Harrison argued that Black people in the United States should seize the opportunities afforded by technologies of imperial communication and the propitious wartime “meeting and mingling of the darker peoples on the plains of France.” Harrison did not believe in the supremacy of Western thought. He was a champion of his African intellectual contemporaries, whom, he insisted, African Americans should read rather than “ignorantly aspire to lead”; he contended that Black colleges in the United States should drop Greek and Latin in favor of Hausa and Arabic. Yet his conception of the world’s injustices and potentially liberatory futures was not derived from a straightforward recuperation of non-Western alternatives. An intellectual bricoleur, Harrison was also attentive to the novel possibilities of political thought opened up by a post-First World War conjuncture. To this aim, he emphasized the role of print technology and journalism in the service of constructing a radically alternative worldview. In an editorial statement for the magazine New Negro, published in September 1919, he insisted that African Americans needed a publication that would both “chronicle” and “interpret” “events of world-importance,” thus helping to create an “international consciousness of the darker races.” Harrison’s idea of the world was of a space burdened with violence, yet weighted with possibility.

Such worlds were conjugated through gendered relations of intellectual production. The distinction between home and the world, the masculine assertiveness of scope, unequal access to travel and print—all are features of this writing, as they are of a broader archive of patriarchal anticolonialism. At the same time, the image of the world in Black anticolonialism constitutes a significant intervention in the theorization of gender, if we consider such theory as seeking to understand how the matter of the body is constituted by power beyond it. In an archive riven by gender, anticolonialists across the Black Atlantic provocatively explored the registration of colonial power on the racialized body.