

Pan-Africanism

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“Pan-Africanism” denotes a variety of political and cultural movements that advocate solidarity among people of African descent. The term “pan-African” was coined at the turn of the twentieth century and may designate, variously, alliances between all African countries, all people native to Africa, or all people of African heritage across the globe. Each strand has its own distinctive history, and the term’s relevance today lies in its potential to analyze the impasses in these histories and/or reanimate their goals in contemporary contexts. According to Google’s N-gram tool, the use of the term peaked in the 1960s, coinciding with struggles for liberation and civil rights among people of African heritage and the establishment of formal structures to facilitate cooperation among newly independent African states. However, the term was first used among diasporic Africans, and its relevance for African American studies in an era of globalization is indicated by the resurgence of the term since the 1990s.

What exactly “pan-Africanism” designates has long been debated, and one might argue that contentions over its meaning and purpose are, in fact, the most representative referents of the word. In other words, to see Pan-Africanism *in action* we must look at moments when people of African descent have struggled over naming a recurrent desire to advance a common purpose. A 1962 essay by the historian George Shepperson, published in one of the foundational journals of African American studies, *Phylon*, began with alarm at how the term was being “bandied about with disturbing inaccuracy” (346)—a clear example of how “pan-Africanism” has also generated heated scholarly debate. The essay distinguishes between a discrete set of political gatherings associated with a central figure, W. E. B. Du Bois (who happened to be the editor of *Phylon*), designated with the



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proper noun “Pan-Africanism” and a collection of often ephemeral, predominantly cultural movements designated with the common noun “pan-Africanism.” Shepperson included the Pan-African Congresses held in 1919 (Paris), 1921 (London), 1923 (Lisbon), 1927 (New York), and 1945 (Manchester), although a subsequent 1974 congress hosted by Julius Nyerere in Tanzania claimed the mantle of continuing this tradition. These congresses constitute the most stable canon of Pan-Africanism, and as such, they generate little controversy as exemplars. However, Shepperson’s distinction remains influential and productive, not only as an analytic tool but as a starting point for revision, and this essay offers a survey of some of the more fraught uses of “pan-Africanism.”

The belief in shared destinies among diverse communities of African descent predates our term. “Pan-Africanism” usefully designates the survival strategies developed in the face of the depredations of the transatlantic slave trade. Because the mass deportation of Africans to the Americas often threw together members of different African ethnicities who shared neither language nor religion, diasporic Africans developed new spiritual practices, fraternal societies, and political resistance movements adapting African cosmologies to a new context. Syncretic religions such as Haitian Vodoun, Cuban Santería, Jamaican Kumina, and Brazilian Candomblé drew on multiple sources and sometimes facilitated organized uprisings, most spectacularly in the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804. Similarly, American Protestants who foregrounded a continental heritage, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church (a denomination that was founded in Philadelphia and spread to the Caribbean and West and Southern Africa by the end of the nineteenth century) and congregations such as the First African Baptist Church (in Savannah, Georgia), built long-lasting traditions of education and political activism.

Arguably, an early discourse of pan-Africanism emerged through another abolitionist motivated by religious convictions: David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World* addressed the problem of slavery in the United States as one of world-historical consequence. However, his objections to the American Colonization Society’s proposal to transport



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free New World blacks to Liberia were at odds with another, more widely recognized foundational figure for pan-Africanism, Edward Wilmot Blyden. Blyden, born in St. Thomas, emigrated to Liberia in 1850 and became an influential voice in education, politics, and publishing. As an early advocate of Ethiopianism, he built on popular interpretations of scriptures prophesying renewal in Africa, especially Psalm 28:11, which states, “Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” (KJV). Blyden suggested that the Back-to-Africa movement was an African parallel to Zionism; however, Liberia’s tortured history, as fraught as Palestine’s, suggests that the philosophies also advanced gravely problematic settler-colonial logics. Blyden’s newspaper columns and early articulations of Ethiopianism influenced future forms of pan-Africanism, and his embrace of Islam late in life presages its role in the pan-Africanist turn of figures such as Malik el-Shabbaz (Malcolm X). Such narratives complicate the term’s histories, particularly since many of the most prominent twentieth-century pan-Africanists embraced leftist philosophies skeptical of religion.

The term enters the printed record through advertisements for a conference held in 1900 in London. The first Pan-African Conference was organized by the Trinidadian barrister H. Sylvester Williams along with members of the African Association he had formed in 1897. The shift in nomenclature from “African” to “Pan-African” mirrored contemporaneous currents of nationalism, such as pan-Slavism and the unification movements of Italy and Germany in the late nineteenth century. The Pan-African Conference proposed to discuss what was known as the “Native Races” question. Representatives of African descent from all parts of the British Empire, the United States of America, Abyssinia, Liberia, and Haiti were invited, as were a number of allies of other races (primarily white Brits). The closing address (by a committee led by Du Bois) introduced one of the most familiar diagnoses of race relations, that “the problem of the twentieth century is the colour line.” Along with imperialism, lynching, and other matters, deep concern was raised over the labor conditions in South Africa and Rhodesia. This demonstrates a key function of such public Pan-Africanist events—gathering information from advocates (in this case, a report from Mrs. A. V. Kinloch, a South African woman mar-



ried to a mining manager) to mobilize global support for local struggles. Although the conference did not yield lasting organizational structures, it built on earlier gatherings such as the 1893 Chicago Conference on Africa that were pan-Africanist in spirit if not in name and presaged future projects that grounded antiracist and anti-imperialist work in a global African community.

One important strategy that emerged was *print pan-Africanism*. Across the globe, the black press already closely followed international events, but soon explicitly pan-African publications such as the *African Times and Orient Review*, founded by the Egyptian entrepreneur and actor Muhammed Dusé Ali in 1912, arose. Newspapers were also important as the official voices of specific organizations, and one of the most rancorous splits between advocates of pan-Africanism—the long-running feud between Du Bois and the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey—can be traced in the pages of their respective publications, the *Crisis* (the official organ of the NAACP) and *Negro World* (associated with the Universal Negro Improvement Association and published in three languages). Indeed, while Garvey's call for black people in the diaspora to move “back to Africa”—with Garvey himself as the continent's provisional president—and his fiscal problems troubled other black leaders, the sheer number of people who at one time subscribed to his ideas is the strongest evidence of his pan-Africanist influence. The international convention he led in 1920 offered a spectacle that drew thousands to witness the event in Harlem, and the UNIA boasted subscribing members not only across the U.S. but also in the Caribbean and Africa. Such a widespread membership would not have been possible without *Negro World*.

The prominent place of journals such as *Légitime défense*, *L'étudiant noir*, and *Tropiques* in forging ties among Franco-phone students and artists of diverse African descent offers another example of print pan-Africanism. Indeed, such publications fostered the rise of *négritude*, a literary movement that began in Paris, where students from across the French Empire met and exchanged political and aesthetic visions. First coined by the Martinican Aimé Césaire as a tactic to recuperate the derogatory valences of the French term for black person, *nègre*,



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négritude became a cultural principle whose meanings evolved and diverged in the hands of Césaire's friends Léopold Senghor of Senegal and Léon Damas of French Guyana. Ironically, *négritude* eventually became a site of contestation, but the most heated debates unfolded in contexts that could be considered pan-Africanist, such as the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar in 1966. While rarely explicitly political, print pan-Africanism can be traced in the international coverage of magazines such as *Ebony*, *Negro Digest*, *Drum*, and *Bingo* and in an analogous body of scholarly publications such as *Phylon*, *Présence Africaine*, *Transition*, and *Callaloo*, all of which encompass a broad range of material by and about work by people of African descent.

Such lists reveal one of the limitations of pan-Africanism as an anthologizing tool: the immense African presence in Latin America (not only in Brazil but also in the Spanish-speaking world) is rarely adequately represented. Another limitation of approaches that foreground global black experience is the exclusion of North Africans in pan-Africanism, a problem all the more ironic considering Duse Ali's role and the prominence in Black Power and black consciousness discourses of the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's theorizations of Algerian colonization. Some attempts at reconciling this tension include the Pan-African Festival of Art and Culture held in Algiers in 1969 and the aesthetics of jazz musicians such as Randy Weston (drawing extensively from Moroccan music) and Sun Ra (whose fascination with Egypt influenced his Arkestra's performance style and led to concerts there in the 1970s and '80s).

On the African continent, pan-Africanism has often designated state-based projects, and in the main, the rhetoric of cooperation has often exceeded concrete diplomatic or economic union. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), which was founded in 1963, grappled with one of the central tensions within pan-Africanism. On the one hand, pan-Africanism works toward collective liberation of people of African descent fighting domination. On the other hand, such liberation requires dismantling local forms of oppression and securing sovereignty and thus is potentially at odds with supranational policies. Indeed, the OAU was formed only after a dispute between the Casa-



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blanca bloc (Ghana, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Mali, and Libya), which advocated moving rapidly toward political federation, and the Monrovia bloc (Senegal and most other former French colonies, Nigeria, Liberia, and Ethiopia), which pressed for economic cooperation. The dispute was resolved at a conference in Addis Ababa, headquarters for the OAU and its successor, the African Union (AU). Since 2007, the AU has included the diaspora as the sixth official region.

Ethiopia's role is fitting, given the symbolic weight that Ethiopia has carried in diaspora imaginaries. The long history of one of the few African kingdoms that did not fall to European imperialism was a source of pride well beyond Ethiopia's borders and beyond the nineteenth-century Ethiopianism described earlier. When Mussolini invaded what was then known as Abyssinia in 1935, Africans on the continent and in the diaspora rallied in support, and events were covered extensively in the global black press. Among the most enduring organic intellectual traditions to emerge from Ethiopianism is Rastafarianism. A spiritual tradition that reveres the last Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, as divine, Rastafarianism has influenced the philosophies of many reggae musicians, including the most explicitly pan-African, Bob Marley, whose song "Africa, Unite!" (1979) still captures the aspirations of a rich panoply of movements.

What can pan-Africanism do for African American studies today? It might account for the influence of Caribbean intellectuals such as Sylvia Wynter and C. L. R. James on the field in the U.S. It could analyze the Black Arts Movement's embrace of African symbols. It could uncover legacies of the solidarity work that supported liberation struggles in Southern Africa. Pan-Africanism could broaden movements for racial justice in the U.S. Recent initiatives such as #BlackLivesMatter could trace links between racialized policing in the U.S. and stringent European policies toward migrants crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa or the treatment of favela residents in the lead-up to the World Cup and Olympics. And campaigns against mass incarceration would offer a different account of disproportionate sentences for drug offenses if the circuits of trafficking through the Caribbean, Latin America, and West Africa were



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part of our analysis. These are but a few examples of why “pan-Africanism” continues to speak to the field.



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