Territorial Spoils, Transnational Black Resistance, and Canada’s Evolving Autonomy during the First World War

PAULA HASTINGS

This article unpacks the rise and fall of Canadian campaigns to annex Britain’s West Indian colonies during the First World War to underscore the significance of the West Indies and the rise of transnational Black resistance to Canada’s evolving autonomy in the British Empire. It suggests that the war-time struggle for Canadian autonomy was a racially-inscribed project whose outcome was contingent on the increasingly fraught relations between white Canadians and West Indians of colour. By inserting the West Indies and West Indian struggles for racial justice in the war-time discourse of Canadian autonomy, the article places an important war-time social formation in dialogue with a subject that is normally explored in the analytic confines of diplomatic and constitutional histories.

Le présent article expose la montée et la chute des campagnes canadiennes visant à annexer les colonies britanniques des Indes occidentales au cours de la Première Guerre mondiale afin de souligner l’importance des Antilles britanniques et la montée de la résistance transnationale des Noirs en ce qui a trait à l’évolution de l’autonomie du Canada au sein de l’Empire britannique. L’auteure suggère que la lutte pour l’autonomie canadienne pendant la guerre était un projet à motivation raciale dont l’issue dépendait des relations de plus en plus tendues entre les Blancs canadiens et les Antillais noirs. En évoquant les Antilles britanniques et les luttes en faveur de la justice raciale de ces îles dans le discours de guerre sur l’autonomie canadienne, l’article place un élément important de la formation sociale du temps de la guerre en dialogue avec un sujet qui se limite normalement à l’histoire diplomatique et constitutionnelle.

* Paula Hastings is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Toronto. She is grateful to Carolyn Podruchny and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Thanks are also due to Jacob Remes, who critiqued a recent version, and to David Barry Gaspar, Sean Mills, Adele Perry, Philip J. Stern, John Herd Thompson, and Susan Thorne who provided earlier comments on the research that culminated in this paper. Funding for this research was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation/American Council of Learned Societies. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in New Orleans, January 2013, the Black Canadian Studies Association in St. Catharines, May 2013, the Canadian Society for the History of Medicine, Victoria, June 2013, and at the Connected Histories of Empire Conference, Centre for the Study of Colonial and Postcolonial Societies in Bristol, July 2013.

© Histoire sociale / Social History, vol. XLVII, n° 94 (Juin / June 2014)
DURING THE FIRST World War, hundreds of West Indians migrated to Canada to join the Canadian armed forces, to meet the labour demands created by wartime economic expansion and the absence of enlisted workers, and to study at Canadian universities. Reporting on the Jamaicans who had made their way to Halifax in 1916 to enlist, Jamaica’s Daily Gleaner editor Herbert DeLisser waxed sentimental about their warm reception in Canada: “There is now at Halifax some one hundred and six of our men, and it is known that they could not be kindlier treated if they were at home. Kindness and sympathy is [sic] extended to them; and this indeed was to be expected from the Canadian people, one of the most homely, kindly and courteous peoples we have ever had the pleasure of travelling amongst.” To Delisser, the increased migration of West Indians to Canada during the war was a testament to Canada’s connection to Jamaica—a connection that, in his assessment, might soon transform into some form of political and commercial federation. After the war, he continued, “Canada will make a bid for tropical provinces on lines that will do no violence to the feelings of West Indians and no injury to their material interests.”

A Jamaican of African and Jewish descent, DeLisser was actively involved in the island’s cultural life and commercial development until his death in 1944. His speculation about the possibility of a “Greater Canada” that included the British West Indies was part of the global interest in the territorial changes expected after the war, an interest first aroused by the Allied occupation of German colonies in the early years of the conflict. The other dominions—Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa—had either occupied or laid claim to German territory in the South Pacific and southwest Africa, so it seemed appropriate that Canada—the oldest and largest dominion—should also obtain new possessions. “During the next generations,” DeLisser wrote, “that portion of the King’s self-governing dominions will devote itself to exploiting the resources of what amounts to a tropical empire ... the Canadians, believing that they have a great future in the world, have for some time past been wishing for some portion of the tropics that should be a complement to their magnificent country.” While Canada might “exploit” West Indian resources, DeLisser was confident it would be a mutually advantageous federation based on respect and shared imperial sentiment. In bringing the Empire’s vast peoples together in the service of a noble cause, the war had created “a homogenous feeling ... a oneness of outlook” that suggested “a reorganization of Imperial relationships” after the war.

DeLisser’s musings about a postwar federation of Canada and the British West Indies were more than just fanciful journalism. A few months after he published his editorial on the subject, Canada’s Department of State, at the request of Prime Minister Robert Borden, released a nine-page report to the Canadian Cabinet entitled “Confidential Memorandum upon the Subject of the Annexation of the

1 Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], April 12, 1916.
3 Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], April 12, 1916.
West India Islands to the Dominion of Canada.” According to the report, the absence of German colonies in the Americas—which no doubt relieved Canadians at the outbreak of war—placed Canada at a distinct disadvantage in the scramble for postwar accessions. As territorial readjustments were being discussed in London, Paris, and Washington, it “behooves Canada to consider in what measure she can best secure an equivalent to those territorial advantages which she will be glad to see her sister Dominions acquire.” These advantages included free access to tropical products, a large, secure market for Canadian exports, the development of Canadian sea power—a vital prerequisite to administer, trade with, and protect geographically isolated islands and a long-term goal of Borden’s government—and the national prestige associated with governing “subject races.”

Acquisition of these territorial concessions was all the more urgent during the war given the United States’ growing influence in the region. In the years immediately following the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 (which heightened the estimated value of the Caribbean world-wide), the United States intervened in Haiti and the Dominican Republic and purchased the Danish West Indies. Canada’s annexation of the British West Indies thus provided a means to check American influence in the hemisphere. It also promised to secure trade relationships made volatile by the war. The war had cut off European trade with central and South America, which presented opportunities for the expansion of trade between North and South America. The “great rivalry of the future will be for control of the tropics,” remarked one Canadian contemporary in October 1918, and there was no more compelling indicator of this trend than the United States’ recent expansion in the Caribbean.

The war-time campaign for the federation of Canada and the British West Indies has been documented in studies by P. J. Wigley, Robin Winks, Brinsley Samaroo, and Peter James Hudson. Focusing exclusively on the war years, Wigley’s study offers the most detailed account of the personalities who gave rise to and sustained the annexation momentum, particularly in the latter years of the war. Canadian merchants, bankers, journalists, and politicians clamoured for a piece of the West Indies, as did some prominent members of government in Ottawa and London.

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4 “Confidential Memorandum upon the subject of the annexation of the West India Islands to the Dominion of Canada” (Ottawa, Dominion of Canada, 1917), pp. 2-3, 4, 5. While the provenance of this document was likely the Department of External Affairs (RG 25), it is catalogued separately in the library collections of Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC].

5 Harry J. Crowe, “Canada and the West Indies,” United Empire, October 1918.

Prime Minister Borden found notable allies for the cause in Canadian Minister of Trade and Commerce George Foster, British Cabinet Minister Alfred Milner, Assistant Secretary in the British War Cabinet Leo Amery, and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Borden’s representatives in Ottawa and London gathered information about the West Indies, culminating in the Department of State’s confidential report on the subject in 1917. The report, which concluded that Canada’s absorption of the islands was feasible and desirable, provided Borden and his ministers with a basis to advance the proposal formally at the Imperial War Cabinet meetings. These meetings generated a growing interest in the proposal in Canada, Britain, and the West Indies, prompting several enthusiasts to register their support in London and Ottawa throughout the remaining years of the war.7

The annexation proposal ultimately failed, according to Wigley, due to the general chaos of the postwar period and the fading enthusiasm, by the fall of 1919, of formerly keen advocates. In “the frenetic and quite unprecedented activities of these postwar months,” Wigley writes, Milner and Amery were too busy to push the question at the Paris Peace Conference, and Borden certainly did not have the influence to do so. When the Canadian prime minister returned to Ottawa in May 1919, he was preoccupied with efforts to revive his weakened political position. He was, moreover, physically drained from his long European visit and spent the months leading up to his retirement in July 1920 convalescing. For the members of Borden’s cabinet who had earlier supported the annexation proposal, the financial responsibility of maintaining new colonies—especially the funds required for naval development—was not feasible in the economic depression of the immediate postwar period. Nor was there any clear sense of what Canada’s postwar role in the world should look like. Canada had won a seat on the newly formed League of Nations, but what exactly would this new role require? For many Canadians, Wigley concludes, “this new world of international affairs might be an uncomfortable place” wherein it might be best to avoid external responsibilities.8

The records in Ottawa and London confirm a considerable interest in the annexation idea in the latter years of the war and indicate that this interest had dissipated by the fall of 1919. The explanation for this rise and fall is, however, more complex than Wigley’s study suggests. A product of the historiographical tradition that conceptualizes Canada’s imperial roles and responsibilities in the context of Canada’s relationships with Britain and the other “white dominions,” Wigley’s study does not seriously consider the import of the West Indies, and especially white Canadians’ racialization of West Indians, to the war-time negotiation of Canada’s position in the Empire and the world. Nor does it take proper account of the role played by West Indians like DeLisser in shaping the outcome of the annexation question. The purpose of this article is thus twofold: to interrogate the significance of the West Indies to the war-time discourse about Canadian autonomy in the Empire and to incorporate and assess West Indian voices in this discourse. In so doing, the article demonstrates that the war-time campaign

8 Wigley, “Canada and Imperialism,” pp. 231, 222-223, 244, 248-250; quotations can be found on p. 244 and p. 248.
for a Canada-West Indies federation and, by extension, the struggle for Canadian autonomy were racially inscribed projects whose outcomes were contingent on the increasingly fraught relations between white Canadians and West Indians of colour. These fraught relations dampened interest in and ultimately quashed the possibility of federation by the fall of 1919.

By inserting the West Indies and West Indian voices in the war-time discourse of Canadian autonomy, this paper places an important war-time social formation—the rise of black resistance and consciousness—in dialogue with a subject that is normally explicated in the analytic confines of diplomatic, political, and constitutional histories. To be sure, social historians have long since broadened the war’s empirical terrain beyond high-ranking military officials and politicians, illuminating the roles and experiences of ethnic minorities, women, families, workers, labour groups, and Aboriginal peoples. Yet aside from the cultural-political battles between French- and English-speaking Canadians to define Canada’s relationship with Britain—a battle that peaked with conscription in 1917—we have little sense of how the wider social and cultural formations produced by the war shaped the discussion about Canada’s evolving autonomy.

Historians have long identified the First World War as “one of the great turning points in the evolution of the Empire.”9 For India and the dominions, the war prompted increased participation in imperial affairs and incited, in many cases, a heightened national consciousness. As Robert Holland has observed, Canadian, New Zealander, and Australian soldiers “blooded” a new nationality at the Front, while dominion statesmen fought for a greater voice in the conduct of war and the constitutional reorganization of the Empire.10 To those who popularly anthropomorphized the constituent parts of the Empire, Canada and the other dominions matured from “children” to “sisters” of Britain. Prime Minister Borden urged dominion representation in the Imperial War Cabinet, at the Imperial War Conferences, and in the British Empire delegation at the Peace Conference. Most significantly, he drafted resolution IX (introduced at the Imperial Ministers’ Conference in 1917), which identified the dominions as “autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth.”11 The resolution called for the extension of dominion autonomy in domestic affairs to external relations, as well as a voice in imperial foreign policy.12

The battlefields and councils of Europe were not the only spaces where Canadians negotiated their place in the Empire. This study foregrounds, more specifically, the significance of the world outside Britain and the other dominions to the war-time discourse about Canadian autonomy. In conventional studies the

historical actors who work out Canada’s autonomous future are white Canadians and Britons, often in collaboration with white South Africans, Australians, and New Zealanders. The Empire’s non-white peoples and domains have practically no role in this discussion. Yet, as Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have shown, the ways in which Canada and the other “white men’s countries” negotiated their place in the world was predicated on their privileged (white) position along the “global colour line.” Subscription to this racial geography fuelled transnational racial solidarities and inaugurated what black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois derogatorily called a “new religion of whiteness.” Recent studies by Ryan Touey, John Price, and Peter James Hudson have shown how the racially inscribed world-views of Canadian politicians, diplomats, and businessmen shaped their policies and practices on the world stage. Canadians with expansionist designs on the Caribbean claimed it was their racial prerogative to do so. Exercising this prerogative, which entailed not just administering the West Indies but, more importantly, “developing” them, would command international recognition and bolster (if only in a figurative sense) Canada’s autonomy.

The global colour line was an insidious construct for several reasons, not least because it belied the ethnic plurality of “white men’s countries” and the fact that, to use Adele Perry’s words, “all colonies are ones of occupation.” Maintaining the fiction of Canada’s whiteness thus depended on restrictive immigration policies and the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples. Of course this was never a neat and tidy process, with immigrants and Aboriginal peoples always present not only to expose the veneer of a white Canada, but to challenge its very foundations. Imperial migrants from the other side of the colour line, such as British West Indians, proved especially problematic to Canadian immigration officials because these immigrants invoked their British subjecthood and their consequent right to fair play. Despite immigration officials’ efforts to obstruct this migration as much as possible, hundreds of West Indians journeyed north during the war. Many


encountered racist attitudes and exclusionary practices that sometimes turned violent. West Indians, often in cooperation with black Canadians and African Americans resident in Canada, organized in various ways to contest these racist practices.

This mobilization of black organization and resistance is exemplified by three episodes of racialized conflict and contestation that embroiled would-be military recruits and students at McGill and Queen’s universities. Their struggles for racial justice were part of a broader pattern of black resistance during the First World War. As Sarah-Jane Mathieu has shown in her recent study of Canada’s black sleeping car porters, peoples of African descent in Canada established institutions and forged networks like never before, giving rise to “a tangible transnational race consciousness.”

While these struggles for racial justice were characterized more often by disappointment than by triumph, they laid the foundation for a new, organized form of resistance that exposed and challenged the contradictions of colonial rule.

These episodes of racial conflict and the resistance they engendered among black subjects in Canada ultimately scuttled the possibility of a federation of Canada and the British West Indies. Herbert DeLisser’s hope in 1916 that the war would mitigate racial differences and prompt a readjustment of imperial relationships along more homogeneous lines was dashed in 1918-1919 by the marked exacerbation of racial tensions and inequalities—at home in Jamaica, in Canada, and overseas. He came to expect that a federation with Canada would indeed do violence to the feelings of West Indians. Like millions of other colonial peoples, thousands of West Indians contributed to the Allied cause in France, northern Africa, and the Middle East, and they did so with the expectation of greater political representation and autonomy after the war. Peoples of colour in self-governing societies were similarly eager to do their part in the war and were equally invested in postwar change. Yet, in the face of mounting adversity and racial animosity during and immediately following the war, this optimism was replaced with disillusionment and contempt for colonial rule. The war-time struggles of West Indians in Canada exposed white Canadian sentiments toward peoples of colour, while the form of governance envisioned in Ottawa—territorial rather than provincial status, a limited franchise, and restricted mobility to continental Canada—was grossly incompatible with the emerging transnational consciousness of Canada’s black subjects.

**Negotiating Autonomy and Governance across the Global Colour Line**

“If the West Indies were brought into the Confederation,” the editor of Montreal’s *By-Water Magazine* wrote in March 1917, “we should have semi-tropical and —

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tropical territories which would make us completely self-sustaining.” It would “greatly augment” not only Canada’s commercial capabilities, but its “political importance” as well.21 Taking responsibility for West Indians of colour was central to this process. As Toronto-based timber baron Harry J. Crowe unabashedly declared, “Do not let us be ‘Little Canadians,’ but rather Expansionists in the broadest sense of the word. Let us do what lies in our power to bring about the confederation of Canada and the B. W. I. Let us assist in the developments of our brothers of a darker race, and add to our borders what is an almost tropical dominion.” Broadening Canada’s national outlook and prestige, according to Crowe, required the dominion to take responsibility for both the economic development of the West Indies and the cultural development of its diverse populations.22

As the histories of the European powers were alleged to demonstrate, acquiring and administering colonial territories were more than prerequisites to domestic economic growth. Assuming responsibility for the development of the hundreds of thousands of dark-skinned and thus (by the logic of early twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon racial pretension) socially and intellectually challenged West Indians would boost the dominion’s autonomy and go a long way in establishing Canada’s international profile. It would, according to the Department of State, add “considerably to the importance and influence of the Dominion.”23 Canada might, in effect, become an empire in its own right. “The responsibilities of governing subject races,” Prime Minister Borden remarked in June 1916, “would probably exercise a broadening influence upon our people as the Dominion thus constituted would closely resemble in its problems and its duties the Empire as a whole.”24 Administering “a territory largely inhabited by backward races,” he wrote in a subsequent correspondence, would provide Canada’s public service with invaluable training.25 As By-Water Magazine put it, Canada’s annexation of the West Indies would birth an “Empire within an Empire.”26 The Department of Trade and Commerce’s Watson Griffin, who had furnished the trade statistics for the confidential memorandum, was more explicit in modelling Canada’s imperial trajectory on that of Britain’s. Comparing the British Raj’s United Provinces of Agra and Oudh to the potential of British Guiana, Griffin hinted that Guiana could become for Canada what India was to Britain.27

A rich and growing body of feminist, post-colonial, and anti-racist scholarship has underscored the constitutive function of exclusionary rhetoric and practices to Canada’s national formation(s). Euro-Canadians, particularly British settlers and immigrants, have historically defined the nation in opposition to a racialized

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21 “A larger Canadian Confederation,” By-water Magazine [Montreal], March 1917, p. 5.
22 Harry J. Crowe, “Commercial Union with the West Indies or Confederation?” Canada-West Indies Magazine [Montreal], December 1916—January 1917, p. 632; The National Archives of the United Kingdom [hereafter TNA], CO 318/352, folio 278, Harry J. Crowe to Colonel de Satgé, July 14, 1919.
23 “Confidential Memorandum,” p. 4.
26 “A Larger Canadian Confederation,” By-Water Magazine [Montreal], March 1917, p. 5.
Other, whether this Other resides within or outside the nation-state’s borders.\textsuperscript{28} Hardly unique to Canada, such racialization is a defining feature of modern nation-states, one rooted, Sunera Thobani writes, in Western ontologies that “have long been based on binary constructions with the self being constituted in relation to its excluded Other.”\textsuperscript{29} It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Europe’s colonial powers defined national sovereignty in large part through the colonial encounter and especially the racial and cultural distinctions this encounter generated.\textsuperscript{30} To Canada’s British settlers, who maintained an abiding respect for British culture and the work of Empire, Britain’s Crown colonies and dependencies similarly provided a logical Other to fuel their own nation-building projects. The British West Indies were a particularly useful referent given their geographical proximity to Canada and the long-established commercial ties between the two regions.

For white Canadians with expansionist designs on the Caribbean, the British West Indies were formative to Canada’s evolution in the British Empire. Their racialization of West Indians, achieved primarily through paternalist rhetoric and practices, was central to this process. Paternalism, to draw from Mary Renda’s definition, “was an assertion of authority, superiority, and control expressed in the metaphor of a father’s relationship with his children. It was a form of domination, a relation of power, masked as benevolent by its reference to paternal care and guidance, but structured equally by norms of paternal authority and discipline.”\textsuperscript{31} While white Canadian annexationists—offspring of Empire themselves—preferred the “big white brother” trope to a parental one, their anticipated relations with West Indians of colour following the proposed federation were nonetheless structured by a paternalist model. This paternalism found expression principally in the interconnected rhetorics of colonial development and governance.


Like their European predecessors, Canadian annexationists argued that the development of the West Indies depended foremost on “a larger guiding hand of Anglo-Saxons.” On “all of the islands as well as on the main land the agricultural possibilities are enormous,” argued Montreal financier Andrew Drummond, but West Indians were thought incapable of initiating this development. Part of the problem, according to some annexationists, was that the West Indies’ current Anglo-Saxon guardian—Britain—was not fulfilling its responsibilities. The dwindled flow of British capital into the region, combined with Britain’s staunch commitment to free trade (which had left West Indian products unprotected and unable to compete), had devastated the colonies’ economies. The Managing Director of Canada’s Royal Bank, Edson Loy Pease (who had been the driving force behind the bank’s original foray and subsequent expansion in the Caribbean), agreed that the British West Indies possessed “the elements that would tend to cheap production—namely, a rich soil and cheap labor,” but they lacked adequate capital and guidance from Britain. The colonies produced about 200,000 tons of sugar in 1915, the bulk of which Canada absorbed, but they were capable, according to Pease, of producing 3 million tons per year. The suggestion of Pease and other annexationists that the British West Indies would realize this potential under formal Canadian control did not go unsupported in London. Prime Minister David Lloyd George agreed that Britain was unable to “develop all the vast territories of the Empire,” and he—along with Leo Amery, a member of the War Cabinet who would become Colonial Secretary after the war—encouraged Borden to take up such work in Britain’s stead. “The United Kingdom obviously cannot do it all,” Amery wrote to Borden in August 1918, “and the Dominions would naturally throw themselves into the work with greater zest if the connection were a direct one, at any rate as regards certain parts of the dependent Empire.” Canada would have more reason, in other words, to invest capital and energy in the development of the West Indies under a federal arrangement.

Visions of untapped tropical abundance, like Borden’s image of the West Indian colonies as “rich and undeveloped territories,” have long appeared alongside constructs about the indolence of “tropical races.” From the advent of European

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34 Churchill Archives Centre [hereafter CAC], Cambridge University, AMEL 2/1/1, Amery to Borden, August 19, 1918. This correspondence is reproduced in Documents on Canadian External Relations, Volume I, 1909-1918 (Ottawa: Roger Duhamel, 1967), pp. 717-718. See also CAC, AMEL 2/1/1, Borden to Amery, August 22, 1918; Amery to Lloyd George, June 8, 1918; Borden to Amery, September 4, 1918; Amery to Borden, September 25, 1918. See also W. A. Riddell, Documents on Canadian Foreign Policy 1917-1919 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 56. Like Alfred Milner and Philip Kerr, Amery was a member of the Round Table group, an organization whose central object was imperial union. The group identified Canada’s annexation of the West Indies as one step towards this larger goal. While Borden appreciated that this annexation might serve imperial interests, he eschewed larger schemes to federate or centralize the Empire on a constitutional basis. Like his predecessors, he favoured an increasingly autonomous role for Canada in the Empire. Consistent with this vision, the “Confidential Memorandum” included not a single reference to Britain. The advantages outlined in the memo pertained exclusively to Canada. On the Round Table group, see John Kendle, The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).
colonialism in the Americas, as Felix Driver and Luciana Martins observe, “the contrast between the productivity of tropical nature and the supposed absence of enterprise among its original inhabitants was routinely used to serve a colonial purpose.” For Canadian annexationists, these constructs justified the need for Anglo-Saxon (or more specifically white Canadian) intervention in the West Indies, while defining the terms of West Indian participation in this intervention. The development construct was thus forged at the intersection of liberalism, capital, and race; white annexationists positioned West Indians of colour astern in a temporalizing universalism that allowed them to justify and maintain control over the economic prospects of the region. In practical terms this meant that black West Indians were subject to what Uday Mehta has called the “not yet” phenomenon—not yet ready for greater autonomy and certainly not self-government. Acquisition of these responsibilities, as Mehta observes in the Indian case, was “conditional on following a specific trajectory of development.” Until that time, Canadian annexationists argued, West Indians of colour had no business involving themselves in the political life of their respective colonies.

According to the Canadian Department of State’s 1917 report on annexation, admitting the West Indies in the federation under the same terms as Canada’s provinces and, in particular, granting them self-government was simply “out of the question.” For this reason, “confederation” was not appropriate. The report outlined: “There can be no confederation of the British West Indies with Canada at the start in the sense in which that word was used in the case of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick half a century ago. There can be no equality of status at the outset.... ‘Annexation’ or ‘incorporation’ would more closely describe the initial process of admission into the union, under which they would become, as it were, ‘Territories’ of the Dominion.” Guided by notions of white racial superiority and the principle of trusteeship, these recommendations outlined a form of Crown colony government similar to that already practised in many of the islands. The central change, of course, was rule from Ottawa rather than London. The report neither took account of nor even recognized the diversity of governance in the region, ranging from austere Crown colony rule to varying degrees of legislative autonomy and representative government. Barbados and the Bahamas, for example, had long operated under the old representative system, which included a legislative assembly as well as a council. For the most part, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and British Guiana remained Crown colonies until the interwar period, with varying concessions in the intervening years.

Without taking account of West Indian opinion, the report concluded that Canada’s absorption of the islands was feasible and desirable. While all the issues outlined in the report presented challenges, none, “with the possible exception of the negro problem,” were insurmountable. To address this “problem,” the

37 “Confidential Memorandum,” p. 4.
38 Ibid., pp. 4, 5.
report recommended territorial rather than provincial status and a restrictive franchise, which was consistent with Borden’s vision of federation. Other Canadian politicians differed in their recommendations. Minister of Trade and Commerce George Foster, for example, proposed few changes beyond a transfer of administration from Ottawa to London. Foster thought it appropriate to govern the West Indians under the same terms in force under British rule. Intent to avoid the appearance of exploitation, however, he maintained that West Indians should initiate the discussion. Former Minister of Finance W. S. Fielding was more reluctant to endorse annexation: “The whole mass of the inhabitants, it must be remembered, are not of the white race. A handful of white men from the Old Country have been remarkably successful in guiding and directing West Indian affairs and in enlisting the sympathy and co-operation of the native races, who are given as large a share in the business of government as circumstances permit.” So successful were they, in fact, that Fielding doubted whether Canada could do a better job. While he was willing to entertain the idea of political federation, he generally favoured a commercial union of the two regions.

Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom George Perley, on the other hand, expressed more serious reservations. Responding to a letter from Borden on the subject in June 1916, Perley wrote, “I have given the matter some consideration, and, while I see many things in favour of it ... I see serious difficulties in connection with the franchise.... I feel that [West Indians] would probably expect a good many more concessions from Canada in the way of political rights than they get from the Mother Country.” These concerns were not unfounded. The idea that West Indians could expect greater political rights in the Canadian federation was liberally propagated throughout the West Indies by Harry Crowe. During his many visits to the Caribbean he assured West Indians that federation would bring about a provincial government of the West Indian islands, with elected representatives in Ottawa. This assurance was visualized in an illustration that accompanied Crowe’s letter to the Daily Gleaner in May 1919 (see Figure 1). The illustration depicts a thoroughly paternalist relationship between “Big White Brother” Canada and the black West Indian labourer to whom he is extolling the benefits of federation. Brother Canada has two placards beside him outlining the political and commercial advantages of federation. On the “Political Advantages” placard we learn that “Provincial governments would handle local affairs as at present,” West Indians would have “representation in the federal government at Ottawa,” and there would be “no race prejudice.”

Crowe’s speeches to Canadian audiences, his articles in British and Canadian newspapers, and his correspondence with members of the Canadian government reveal a very different vision of union than the one he advanced in the West Indies. According to Crowe, white Canadians need not fear a common citizenship with

40 The Journal of Commerce, as cited in the Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], July 29, 1918.
42 British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, Cd. 6092, Agreement between Canada and certain West Indian Colonies, dated 9th April 1912; and correspondence relating thereto, June 1912.
West Indians, nor the increased migration of West Indians to Canada. Like Foster, he proposed a simple transfer of administration from London to Ottawa. Existing structures of local governance in the West Indies would remain unchanged. Canada would assume control over foreign affairs, tariffs, the post office, the marine and fisheries departments, and public works, allowing “limited but adequate” West Indian representation in these areas. More importantly, the restrictive West Indian franchises would not be synchronized with Canada’s more liberal franchise: “There is no demand for extending the vote there, and there is no reason why there should be in the future, unless the development of the people justified it.” West Indians would be similarly disinclined, Crowe argued, to migrate to Canada: “Because of climatic conditions prevailing in Canada, the coloured population of the B.W.I. would never invade our Dominion.” Many persons of colour who migrated to Canada during the American Civil War had, after all, returned to the southern United States when peace was restored. This was, in Crowe’s logic, compelling evidence that “darker races” were unsuited to “temperate and frigid zones.” West Indians would be less likely to leave the region, moreover, because union would stimulate agricultural and industrial development and consequently increase the demand for labour.43

43 LAC MG26-H, vol. 70, Crowe to Borden, September 13, 1916, and Crowe to Loring Christie, November 26, 1919; Harry J. Crowe, “Canada and the West Indies,” United Empire, October 1918, p. 428; “Harry J.
During the war, however, many West Indians did leave the Caribbean to take advantage of opportunities in Canada. Companies such as Sydney’s Dominion Steel and Coal Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway ignored the informal strictures against recruiting workers of colour and actively sought black labour from the West Indies and the United States, while Canadian universities expanded their recruitment efforts in the West Indies to offset the loss of enlisted students.\textsuperscript{44} Resistance to the formation of a black West Indies regiment for overseas service in the British War Office and the Colonial Office prompted eager West Indians to make their own way to England or Canada to enlist. By the time a British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) was approved in May 1915, many West Indians had already enlisted elsewhere.\textsuperscript{45} Several joined fighting battalions with white Canadian soldiers, while discrimination forced others to wait, once again, for the formation of an all-black labour battalion in the summer of 1916.

While this migration may have proved inconvenient for white annexationists like Crowe, it alone did not threaten to derail the annexation proposal. More detrimental was the resistance of these new migrants to the racist attitudes and practices they encountered in Canada. Unwilling to abide this discrimination, particularly amidst the egalitarian rhetoric bantered about during the war, West Indians established periodicals to articulate their claims for equality, formed protective associations, and appealed to their imperial and colonial governments for redress. In the process, they made plain to white Canadians and especially the government at Ottawa that racial discrimination would not be tolerated.

**Organizing for Racial Justice across the Global Colour Line**

In the months following the outbreak of war in August 1914, tens of thousands of men flocked to Canadian recruiting stations to enlist. Hundreds of black Canadians and West Indians were among them. While the Department of Militia and Defence set no racial restrictions, black Canadians (like Aboriginal peoples and those of Japanese, Chinese, and South Asian descent) faced considerable discrimination in their efforts to enlist.\textsuperscript{46} Military officials across Canada advised against placing black and white men in the same regiment,\textsuperscript{47} and recruiting officers routinely sent

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\textsuperscript{44} DUA, University Senate, Meeting Minutes, September 4, 1917; \textit{Daily Gleaner} [Jamaica], May 2, 1914; April 24, 1915; April 12, 1916; April 12, 1917.

\textsuperscript{45} Howe, \textit{Race, War and Nationalism}, pp. 29-40.


black volunteers away, claiming the conflict was “a white man’s war.” These concerns echoed those of Britain’s Army Council and War Office. The Council strenuously opposed placing black soldiers in white combat units, while the War Office preferred to employ blacks in non-combatant, labour units. In the British dominions, this opposition was partly rooted in the fear that combatant service would entitle peoples of colour to political or constitutional concessions and thus destabilize white hegemony.

As Sarah-Jane Mathieu has shown, rejected recruits and their supporters did not sit idly by in the face of this discrimination. They appealed directly to their members of parliament, the Department of Militia and Defence, and Britain’s representative in Canada, the governor general. The black Canadian newspaper The Canadian Observer, run by Canadian-born J. R. B. Whitney, launched a vigorous protest campaign that went a long way in pressuring authorities in Ottawa to approve the formation of a segregated black construction battalion in July 1916. Mathieu argues persuasively that these protests gave rise to a transnational “infrastructure” of organized resistance that laid a critical foundation for racial justice struggles after the war. While West Indians appear intermittently in Mathieu’s study, the infrastructure she investigates—the race-based friendly societies, commercial associations, and “racial uplift” groups—were led and primarily populated by black Canadians and African Americans.

West Indians in Canada were no less active in organizing for racial justice during the war. Halifax-based West Indians founded the Atlantic Advocate in April 1915, a monthly journal “devoted to the interests of colored people in the Dominion generally,” but especially to those in the Maritimes. Wilfred Alleyne DeCosta, a Jamaican-born gardener and collection agent who had immigrated to Nova Scotia around 1908, was the Advocate’s president and associate editor, and his wife Miriam served as secretary. Editorial responsibilities were taken on in 1916 by Ethelbert L. Cross, originally of San Fernando, Trinidad, and the following year by Dr. Clement C. Ligoure, a recent graduate of Queen’s medical school, also from San Fernando.


49 Howe, Race, War, and Nationalism, pp. 46-47.


52 The Atlantic Advocate [Halifax], April 1915; Wilfred DeCosta’s birthplace is listed as Kingston, Jamaica, on his son’s birth certificate. See Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management [hereafter NSARM], Vital Statistics of Nova Scotia, Birth Registry, Wilfred Alleyne DeCosta, b. 1908, Halifax, Halifax County, registered in 1908, p. 56300313. Additional bibliographical material on DeCosta can be found in NSARM, Philip Hartling, “The Atlantic Advocate, Nova Scotia’s First Black Magazine,” unpublished history with biographical notes of Advocate staff, 1992.

53 Hartling, “The Atlantic Advocate.”
Like *The Canadian Observer*, the *Atlantic Advocate* spent several months recruiting for the construction battalion and was always quick to speak out against racial discrimination. When the No. 2 Construction Battalion was denied the customary, patriotic farewell from friends and family upon its departure for Europe in March 1917, the *Advocate* admonished the military officials responsible. “Why,” Ligoure asked, “should our Race be huddled together in one mass, like cattle, marched from the Barracks to the train at Truro, then on arriving at Halifax, driven ... on board the outgoing transport without the last long good-bye to those near and dear to them?” Mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, many of whom had travelled hundreds of miles to bid farewell to their loved ones, were denied the same privilege extended to white families. This unceremonious farewell, Ligoure continued, combined with a series of other discriminatory episodes since the outbreak of war, had fuelled considerable dissatisfaction among Canada’s populations of African descent. “[T]here is without doubt,” Ligoure warned, “a whirlwind of discontentment sweeping over the Dominion among the Colored population which would have been averted had they been given justice.”

Discontent spread in the late summer and early fall of 1917 when conscription came into force under the *Military Service Act*. Following Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden’s trip to Europe in the spring of 1917, during which he visited the front and witnessed the devastation of war firsthand, he returned home determined to enact conscription for overseas service. He introduced the proposition to parliament on May 18, 1917, and the *Military Service Act* became law on August 29. Many black Canadians were outraged to learn that they would be drafted into military service after being turned away—sometimes multiple times—from recruiting stations in the preceding months. The issue was not conscription itself, but the humiliating and highly offensive discrimination that had predated conscription. Voluntary enlistment was widely understood as a patriotic and honourable duty. Denying black Canadians the opportunity to fulfill their service on this basis and then forcing them to enlist was considered a shameful betrayal of British justice and fair play.

The West Indian Trading Association of Canada (WITA) took a lead role in the protest against the conscription of black Canadians and other residents of African descent. Founded in Toronto in 1916 as an auxiliary organization of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), WITA was a cooperative grocery and trading association with shareholders in Quebec, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. Despite its name, WITA’s membership was not confined to West Indians. Like the UNIA, its overarching objective was the “advancement of colored people.” As Trinidad-born WITA President Arthur E. King described it, the key to this advancement was organization. WITA solicited shareholders, established a produce trade with the West Indies, opened at least one grocery store

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54 *The Atlantic Advocate* [Halifax], April 1917.
56 *The Canadian Observer*, September 8, November 17, and December 1, 1917.
in Toronto near Spadina and Queen, and purchased residential properties for rental to men and women of colour.\textsuperscript{58}

WITA members proceeded with the conviction that the “organization and commercialization of the race” would ultimately provide the necessary leverage to effect social and political change. “[B]y becoming commercialized,” É. Millington argued during a WITA meeting in December 1916, “we can make larger demands, can fight the immigration question, and all other questions along Race lines.” In the fall of 1917, WITA centred its protest against the conscription of black Canadians. Toronto members discussed alternatives to conscription at monthly meetings, sent delegates to confer with and gather support from WITA shareholders in Montreal, and presented their grievances to the federal government.\textsuperscript{59}

The Department of Militia and Defence largely ignored protests against compulsory enlistment. The Canadian Expeditionary Force suffered enormous losses in 1917, at Vimy Ridge in the spring and then at Passchendaele in the fall.\textsuperscript{60} In Ottawa, concerns about the limited—or worse, dangerous—fighting capabilities of blacks and the “mingling” of black and white soldiers were blunted by an acute need for reinforcements. Like others who evaded the draft, Canadians of colour who ignored conscription notices and failed to present exemption documents when questioned by military officials were apprehended and forced into service.\textsuperscript{61}

Outside the Department of Militia and Defence, heightened concerns about inter-racial “mingling” prompted the enactment of exclusionary policies in a range of social and intellectual contexts, including restaurants, social clubs, and universities. During the war the medical schools at Queen’s and McGill placed restrictions on black students. Clinical instruction, usually conducted at nearby hospitals, presented a problem because white patients—many of them returned soldiers—refused treatment from physicians and medical students of colour. In 1916, with the support of Queen’s University Senate, Dean of Medicine J. C. Connell prohibited the admission of prospective black students and expelled all 15 black students in residence, most of whom were West Indian. In a community where “a great deal of prejudice against the colored race survives,” Connell explained, “the Faculty decided some months ago that it would not be possible to continue the education of these men.” Those expelled included students in their early years of study who were not yet in the clinical phase of the programme.\textsuperscript{62}

McGill admitted black medical students, but they were required to undergo their obstetrical training elsewhere, usually at a medical training facility in New York or Boston. The Montreal Maternity Hospital had closed its doors to black students a few years earlier, and McGill was thereafter unable to offer incoming black students the clinical course in obstetrics. McGill’s Faculty of Medicine was represented on the Medical Board of the Maternity Hospital, but, according to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{58} The Canadian Observer, December 9 and 23, 1916; January 13, 1917.
\bibitem{59} The Canadian Observer, December 23, 1916; November 24, 1917.
\bibitem{62} DUA, President’s Office fonds, UA3, File 310.10, Mackenzie to J. C. Connell, May 3, 1918; Connell to Mackenzie, May 8, 1918.
\end{thebibliography}
Registrar J. W. Scane, the Faculty “had no voice at all in the management of the institution.” The “problem,” in other words, “was taken out of [McGill’s] hands” by the hospital’s restriction.63

Not long after McGill barred its first students of colour from obstetrical training courses in September 1916, a group of West Indian medical students formed the Gamma Medical League. Aimed at “bringing together the men from various parts of the Empire for their professional, social and mutual benefit,” the League persistently contested McGill’s discriminatory policies. Following the unsatisfactory results of their discussions with medical faculty and the registrar, the League sent a petition to McGill’s Board of Governors on October 21, “setting forth [their] position and praying for redress.” University Principal William Peterson acknowledged receipt of their petition at the end of October, but informed them that it would be “quite some time” before the body that considered student petitions, the University Corporation, reconvened. When the petitioners received no response in the following weeks, they confronted Peterson in person to “enquire as to the fate of their attempt to get justice.” Peterson informed them the petition had been referred to the medical faculty. The students then met with Registrar Scane in January 1917, who assured them that arrangements would be made to facilitate obstetrics and gynaecology courses for black students.64

When the League had not yet received confirmation in June 1917 that such arrangements would be made, members broadened their forum of protest to the West Indies. They sent letters to several prominent newspapers, including Jamaica’s Daily Gleaner, the Jamaica Times, Demerara’s Daily Argosy, and the Barbados Advocate.65 Emphasizing the importance of protest and perseverance in effecting change, the League called West Indians to action. Change “will depend upon the interest you display in the matter to decide whether your children and your children’s children will be debarred from the education so indispensable to civilization.... [We] earnestly ask whether [you] can afford to remain indifferent and see the shrines of knowledge gradually closing their doors on the faces of [your] children.” West Indians resident in Canada were “on the spot” and could see more readily than those at home that the discrimination at McGill was merely “the thin edge of the wedge.”66

The Jamaica Times was particularly vitriolic in its condemnation of McGill. It entreated West Indian governments to register their disapproval with the proper

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63 DUA, President’s Office fonds, UA3, File 310.10, Mackenzie to J. W. Scane, May 3, 1918, and Scane to Mackenzie, May 6, 1918; Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], July 13, 1918, and May 22, 1917.
64 The Canadian Observer, December 11, 1916; Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], May 22, 1917 and March 2, 1918. The elected officers of the Gamma League were R. S. Hall (President, Med. 1917), R. B. Taylor (Vice-President, Med. 1918), P. M. Savory (Secretary, Med. 1919), C. Chandler Jones (Assistant Secretary, Med. 1920), H. L. Ellis (Treasurer, Med. 1920), and Julius Jordan (Chaplain, Arts 1916, Med. 1920). The University Corporation, according to the 1821 Charter of McGill College, consisted of college faculty, governors, and prominent members of the Montreal community. See Stanley Brice Frost, McGill University for the Advancement of Learning: 1801-1895, vol. 1 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1980), p. 79.
65 A detailed description of the League’s activities from September 1916 through July 1917 can be found in the Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], March 2, 1918.
66 Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], June 14, 1918.
authorities at McGill. They should highlight, in particular, how antithetical the university’s practices were to British principles of justice and fair play. Doing so would make McGill and “all the other Canadian centres that are inclined to follow the broad and easy road of prejudice” realize that “their native island and their fellow countrymen have no intention of looking on apathetically.” United action on the part of the colonial governments would, moreover, demonstrate West Indian solidarity against racial prejudice.\(^\text{67}\)

J. A. G. Smith, a black lawyer and member of the Jamaican Legislative Council, brought the issue before Council as early as April 1918. The Council subsequently sent an inquiry, by way of the island’s colonial secretary, to Registrar Scane. In Scane’s reply, he assured the Council that arrangements had been made with an institution in New York City where black students could undergo obstetrical training in the summer between their fourth and fifth years. Scane also emphasized the small minority of black students in the Faculty of Medicine, which, at present, met the “quota” of eight to ten. The implication was, of course, that it was unrealistic to expect McGill to go to great lengths to accommodate so few students. McGill’s arrangement, he added, was much more accommodating than Queen’s policy, which barred black students entirely from the medical school.\(^\text{68}\)

Queen’s discriminatory policy was met with similar disapprobation by West Indians in Canada and the Caribbean. Just as McGill’s Gamma Medical League had sent a petition to all the British West Indian governments, so too did the West Indian Club at Queen’s. Club President E. W. Reece similarly emphasized the importance of education to the “advancement of the colored race” and the hypocrisy of enlisting black soldiers to fight the cause of freedom overseas while discriminating against them at home. Reece and the other petitioners also underlined the incongruity of this discrimination and Canada’s interest in strengthening ties with the West Indies. After the war, Canada “is contemplating not only extensive trade relations with the West Indian islands, but [a] Governmental relationship as well, and it would appear inconsistent in policy that a Government which desires such intimate commercial and political relationships with another people should[,] through its institutions of learning[,] set up barriers against those living in their midst.” The Club urged the West Indian governments to intervene on their behalf by sending an appeal to either the Canadian government or the appropriate governing body at Queen’s.\(^\text{69}\)

The acting Colonial Governor of Barbados, T. E. Fell, went one step further and forwarded the petition directly to the Colonial Office in London. He outlined the implications of Queen’s discriminatory policy in a supplementary letter. Because there were no universities in the West Indies, he pointed out, it was crucial that

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\(^{67}\) *Jamaica Times*, as cited in *The Canadian Observer*, March 16, 1918.


\(^{69}\) TNA, CO 28/293, The West Indian Club of Queen’s University to the Officer Administering the Government of the Colony of Barbados, April 15, 1918, enclosure in T. E. Fell to Walter H. Long, June 4, 1918.
West Indian students continue to have access to universities overseas. If Canadian universities continued to bar (or place restrictions on) West Indian students, Fell argued, these actions were “liable to provoke keen resentment amongst the coloured people of Barbados” and ultimately “induce a feeling of estrangement” towards Canada.\(^{70}\)

The Colonial Office agreed that discrimination against West Indian students at Canadian universities was sure to provoke resentment. It was, as one colonial official remarked, a particularly “unfortunate time for embittering the colour feeling,” given that thousands of West Indians were fighting (or had fought) the Allied cause in France, northern Africa, and the Middle East.\(^ {71}\) Yet, at the same time, the Colonial Office recognized there was little it could do to check racial discrimination in Canada. As a self-governing dominion, Canada controlled its domestic affairs, which included the discretion to exclude imperial (non-white) subjects from other parts of the Empire. Debates over imperial migration and citizenship only a few years earlier, centred on Indian mobility in the Empire, had (re)confirmed this autonomy. At the Imperial Conference of 1911, dominion resistance to imperial citizenship schemes had compelled the British government to “accept the principle that each of the Dominions must be allowed to decide for itself which elements it desires to accept in its population.”\(^ {72}\) If the imperial government conceded autonomy in immigration, it was certainly not in a position to influence—at least not formally—the admission policies of Canadian universities.

The imperial and West Indian governments were unable to intervene on behalf of the student petitioners to eradicate the discriminatory policies at McGill and Queen’s. Yet the petitioners’ protests were nonetheless significant because they laid bare the increasingly organized quality and transnational scope of black resistance in Canada. They exposed the alarming persistence of racial discrimination in Canada while making plain that this discrimination would not be tolerated. In doing so, their protests prompted West Indians and Canadians to question explicitly the desirability of a Canada-West Indies federation.

“Imperial Brotherhood” Denied, Canada-West Indies Federation Denied

Jamaica’s *Daily Gleaner* bluntly reported in June 1917 “that the McGill incident has dealt a terrible blow to the idea of closer union between these two different parts of the British world.” If Canadian universities continued to close the doors of their medical colleges to people of colour, this practice “would put an end once [and] for all to any possibility of closer political unity between the Dominion and the British West Indies.” McGill had “beyond doubt” wounded “the susceptibilities of millions of people” and would, in the future, “inflict hardships on scores of intelligent, well-mannered and entirely respectable men.” Until Canadian universities repudiated their narrow-minded policies and practices,

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\(^{70}\) TNA, CO 28/293, Fell to Long, June 4, 1918.

\(^{71}\) TNA, CO 37/262, May 14, 1918; TNA CO 28/293, June 4, 1918. On West Indian soldiers in the war, see Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*.

West Indians would regard federation proposals with “strong aversion.” A writer under the pseudonym “ITALEAN” shared these sentiments in a letter to the editor: “It appears very strange to me that Canada should be wanting political union with the British West Indies, and at the same time raise the colour bar against the majority of the inhabitants of these islands.” Such a step was “sufficient to damn the scheme” for political federation with Canada.74

The protests of West Indians in Canada were also taken under consideration at meetings of the Associated West Indian Chamber of Commerce, the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce in British Guiana, London’s West India Committee (WIC), and Canada’s Department of Trade and Commerce.75 In response to increased reports of discrimination against West Indians at the Canadian border, the executive committee of the Georgetown Chamber released a statement in its annual report of 1917: “The restrictions which have been placed on the emigration to Canada of coloured persons have been referred to in this chamber.... The restriction is not to this colony alone, as protests have also been made in Barbados. The feeling of the Associated Chamber was that this is not an opportune time to press the [union] question but it is one we will not lose sight of.”76 In June 1917, the Barbados Advocate admonished the Canadian government’s racist immigration practices: “The illegal discrimination now being practiced by the Canadian Authorities against coloured passengers from the West Indies to Canada is sowing the seeds of discontent which will be certain to ultimately develop into strong protest against closer connexion with Canada whether in the form of Trade or otherwise.”77 Canada’s trade commissioner at Barbados forwarded the article to Canada’s Superintendent of Immigration W. D. Scott and requested an explanation. “It is true,” Scott replied in a form letter sent to countless trade agents and boards, steamship company proprietors, and prospective West Indian migrants, “that our Immigration Act contains a provision that the Governor in Council may prohibit the entry of immigrants of any race, etc., deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada.”78 Immigration inspectors possessed the discretionary power to prohibit the entry of blacks, in other words, without explicitly restricting immigration on racial grounds.

The WIC was similarly concerned that Canadian attitudes towards people of colour were detrimental to closer commercial and political relations between the two regions. WIC members had expressed interest in the possibility of a Canada-West Indies federation during the war, but, like the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce, the committee supported the deferral of negotiations until Canada resolved its race question.79
West Indians resident in Canada were understandably more interested, and to varying degrees uneasy, about federation. While Canadian annexationists assured West Indians that Canada would welcome them with open arms and give them a voice in Ottawa, they simultaneously reassured white Canadians that restrictions would be placed on West Indian representation and northward migration. When Judge S. Rowan-Hamilton of the Supreme Court of the Leeward Islands advocated federation during his visit to Halifax in March 1918, *The Canadian Observer* highlighted the “stir among the natives of the West Indies who are in Canada as to the advisability of this move.”\(^{80}\) As residents of Canada, they were all too familiar with white Canadians’ attitudes toward peoples of colour. The promise of Canadian capital—leading to agricultural and industrial development, higher wages, and the ultimate prosperity and improved well-being of West Indians—was no doubt appealing, but West Indian experiences in Canada foretold a different future.

In the twelve months following the Armistice, West Indians of colour interpreted and responded to these experiences—and white Canadians’ racism more generally—with much less tolerance. November 1918 marked the cession of war, but it did not witness an immediate ideological, constitutional, or political break with the past. History is much messier than such a break implies; there was change as well as continuity in the immediate postwar period. Colonial peoples and other subaltern groups remained hopeful that change would still come in the form of increased representation, autonomy, and self-determination. In March 1919 black Torontonian and WITA president Arthur King still identified a Canada-West Indies union as the best means for West Indians to obtain these concessions. He placed some faith in Harry Crowe’s promise that the West Indies would have proportional representation under union. Black Canadians had equal access to the franchise as white Canadians, so it was natural to assume that West Indians would too.\(^{81}\) While it would be an oversimplification to assume race unity across class, colour, and regional difference, the prospect of two million newly enfranchised Canadians of African descent probably appealed to some black Canadian advocates of race equality. Canada’s black population comprised less than two per cent of the population in 1919,\(^{82}\) and the federal legislature was not, consequently, an efficacious forum to pursue race reform.

The Pan-African Congress, which convened in Paris—not coincidentally—at the same time as the Paris Peace Conference, provided a crucial forum for black peoples worldwide to discuss racism, colonialism, and proposals for reform. As an international delegation representing black populations in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, the Congress hoped to influence discussions about racial equality and colonial self-government at the peace talks. The Congress was “an opportunity that we should grasp,” black Canadian George F. Bon asserted in March 1919, “so that we may be able to press our demands with greater energy and influence.” To Bon, the social and political conditions prevailing in the West Indies exemplified the contradictions and injustices of colonial rule. They were

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80 *The Canadian Observer*, March 8, 1918.
81 Ibid.
“a group of islands, rich in resources, and possessing men with educational qualifications equal to the best that Europe or America can produce, yet they are ... undeveloped and divided, and with few exceptions the inhabitants suffer the burdens of taxation without representation.” With “representatives of the race” assembled in Paris, Bon concluded, now was the time for change: “How can we be denied the right to rule ourselves in our own lands when the ‘slogan’ of the Allies ... is ‘democracy’ and ‘self-determination.’ It is inconceivable that the Allies will ignore their own avowed pronunciamento.”

Bon soon learned, however, that the white Allied powers convened in Paris would do just that. The Pan-African Congress was ignored and in some cases obstructed. The United States’ government refused passports to Paris-bound black activists, and the Congress’s manifesto, which entreated the League of Nations to acknowledge the right of all “civilized citizens” to take part in the political and cultural life of their respective states, fell on deaf ears. The outcome of the Peace Conference, especially the defeat of the racial equality clause in the League of Nations covenant, incited worldwide disillusionment. Tabled by the Japanese delegates, the clause stated that, because the “equality of nations” was a basic principle of the League of Nations, League members should “agree that concerning the treatment and rights to be accorded to aliens in their territories, they will not discriminate, either in law or in fact, against any person or persons on account of his or their race or nationality.” Japanese delegate Baron Makino echoed the aspirations of non-white peoples worldwide when he stated that “different races have fought together on the battlefield, in the trenches, on the high seas, and they have helped each other and brought succour to the disabled, and have saved the lives of their fellow men irrespective of racial differences.” These unprecedented experiences, he concluded, had set the tone for a new world order based on racial equality. The clause was defeated on April 13, however. As Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds point out, the dominions—Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and especially Australia—played a significant role in this defeat. Granted separate representation at Versailles (as part of the British delegation), the dominions staunchly opposed the clause for fear it might encourage Asian immigration to their respective countries.

The riots, strikes, and general unrest that characterized demobilization and the return home of hundreds of thousands of servicemen compounded the disillusionment generated by the Paris disappointments. White skilled workers

83 The Canadian Observer, March 1 and 11, 1919.
84 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, pp. 306-308.
87 As cited in Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, p. 291.
were in most cases granted priority in the demobilization timeline. The Black West Indies Regiment, Canada’s No. 2 Construction Battalion, and working-class white servicemen waited in overcrowded European camps for several months before they returned home. As Sarah-Jane Mathieu observes, race riots broke out throughout the winter, spring, and early summer, exposing Canada’s “preoccupation with race and class to the Empire and the world.” These riots made clear that the war “had done little to equalize Canadian society.”

This mass unrest and general lawlessness continued when servicemen returned home. White Canadian veterans were livid to find their jobs had been (or might be) filled by “coloured” labour, while black West Indians, still smarting from their experiences in Europe, returned home to mass unemployment and dire living conditions. The significance of the war for West Indians, argues Glenford Howe, “lay not so much in the novelty of its impact as in the unprecedented way it exacerbated underlying tensions and contradictions implicit” in West Indian societies. Manifest in the strikes, lootings, riots, and other violent disturbances throughout the spring, summer, and fall, these tensions undermined existing structures of colonial rule and, by extension, the prospect of a Canada-West Indies union.

Dr. Robert M. Stimpson, a black Jamaican who had graduated from Quebec’s Bishop’s University in 1898 with a medical degree, had a very different opinion of Canada in May 1919 than he did two years earlier. In May 1917, Stimpson had dismissed West Indian concerns about racial discrimination at McGill on the basis that Montreal’s population was, relative to other Canadian cities, un-British. By May 1919, however, Stimpson was more aware of the broad scope of Canada’s “colour bar.” This scope was particularly alarming in the context of Canada’s Loyalist history. Anyone with knowledge of the Underground Railway or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin would hardly imagine that Canada had “become such a degenerate as to close the doors of its seats of learning” to peoples of African descent, Stimpson wrote. Highlighting the contradictions inherent in Enlightenment notions of progress (more acute in the postwar climate), he continued, “But such it is in this twentieth century of our boasted civilization!”

A closer relationship between Canada and the West Indies could only be forged if the dominion reformed its racist outlook: “Canada must be prepared to come with clean hands, and ample and sufficient guarantees that it has mended its ways.” Jamaicans, he elaborated, were sensitive to any sign of racial discrimination. As a people of integrity and honour, they expected the same courtesies that any civilized community would expect from another. Having “failed to comply with these simple observances,” Canadians should not be surprised if they “are taken at a discount” by West Indians.

89 Mathieu, North of the Color Line, pp. 108-117. Quotations can be found on p. 114.
90 Mathieu, North of the Color Line, pp. 119-120; Howe, Race, War and Nationalism, pp. 172-199.
91 Howe, Race, War and Nationalism, p. 200.
92 Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], May 28, 1917.
93 Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], May 12, 1919. On these contradictions, see Mehta, Liberalism and Empire.
94 Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], May 12, 1919.
The principle of self-determination, liberally propagated by American President Woodrow Wilson in the spring and summer of 1919, left a lasting impression on colonial subjects world-wide. Erez Manela argues persuasively that colonial peoples in Egypt, India, China, and Korea shrewdly appropriated Wilson’s rhetoric in ways that “would help them gain the right to self-determination.” Middle-class West Indians similarly deployed this rhetoric. When a minister in Lloyd George’s government suggested that Britain relinquish several West Indian colonies to the United States to help settle Britain’s war debt, Trinidadian Kathleen I. Liddelow was livid: “Whatever the reason may be, one may well express astonishment that the ink of the Peace Treaty has hardly dried before the principle of self-determination of which we have heard so much lately is apparently forgotten.”

In the wake of what Manela calls the “Wilsonian moment,” Liddelow was understandably outraged at the suggestion that Britain might cavalierly barter its West Indian colonies without even consulting West Indians.

Rothermere’s suggestion was thoroughly out of touch with the emerging political and social milieu in the West Indies. So too was the idea of a Canada-West Indies union. Many commentators who had been previously sceptical of union for commercial reasons were, by the latter half of 1919, opposed on racial grounds. These opponents included the West India Committee, the Jamaica Imperial Association, President of the Associated West Indian Chambers of Commerce Edward Davson, and Gideon Murray, British Member of Parliament and former administrator of St. Vincent and St. Lucia. Even those who had been keenly interested in union during the war, most notably Leo Amery and Robert Borden, were now dubious. Amery’s earlier contention that the West Indies were Canada’s “birthright” was no longer politically or constitutionally appropriate. By June 1919 his enthusiasm was considerably subdued. When Harry Crowe urged Amery, now Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Colonies, to press the Jamaican government to send a delegation to Ottawa to discuss the union proposal, he politely refused. “I told Mr Crowe,” he informed his colleagues in the Colonial Office, “that while we were all in favour of Canadians taking the very greatest interest in the development of the West Indies and were in no sense opposing the idea of a closer union with Canada if the West Indies wished for it, we must be guided by their wishes and were not prepared to push them into it.”

Borden had supported the union proposal as late as March 1919, and he had encouraged his Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Francis Keefer, to advance the proposal in Canada and the West Indies while he was in Paris. By May, however, Borden was no longer interested in pursuing union. Earlier that year, Borden had expressed the

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95 *The Financier*, as quoted in the *Port of Spain Gazette*, September 22, 1919; Liddelow, Letter to the Editor, *West India Committee Circular*, December 11, 1919. Liddelow wrote the letter on October 17.

96 *West India Committee Circular*, June 26, 1919; Edward Davson, Letter to the Editor, *The Times* [London], August 2, 1919; Gideon Murray, Letter to the Editor, *The Times* [London], August 11, 1911; TNA, CO 318/352, Jamaica Imperial Association to the Colonial Office, December 1919; P. G. Wigley, “Canada and Imperialism,” p. 244.


98 LAC MG 26-H, vol. 70, Crowe to Borden, March 1, 1919; Keefer to Borden, March 14, 1919; Borden to Keefer, March 14, 1919.
concern that West Indians might “desire and perhaps insist upon representation in Parliament.” Because Canadian blacks were enfranchised, he feared West Indians of colour might “consider themselves equally entitled.” Following the events in Paris during the spring, Borden was no doubt assured that West Indians would indeed consider themselves “entitled.” He had been in Paris at the same time as the Pan-African Congress, had witnessed the controversy over (and actively opposed) the racial equality clause, and had returned home in May to heightened labour unrest, anti-immigrant campaigns, and racial violence.

Moreover, Keefer’s tour of the West Indies had been disappointing. When he returned to Ottawa in the summer of 1919, he regretfully informed Borden that he had “found practically no sentiment in favour” of a Canada-West Indies union.

The most remarkable about-face in 1919 was that of Jamaica Daily Gleaner editor Herbert George DeLisser. In 1916 DeLisser had looked openly and encouragingly toward a postwar union of Canada and the West Indies, but his opinion had changed dramatically by the fall of 1919. “The West Indies would be for Canada,” he remarked in October, “but Canada would not be for the West Indies.” When British Colonial Secretary Alfred Milner encouraged the dominions to take on a greater political and commercial role with the colonial dependencies nearest them that same month, DeLisser published a vitriolic response. That the dominions were interested in forming closer relationships with nearby dependencies was clear enough, “But why? Not because they want to benefit the people of those colonies. What has Australia done with her natives? Slaughtered them off the face of the earth. What is South Africa doing with hers? Making them slaves—for the position of these unfortunate people is not far removed from that of slaves.” DeLisser similarly admonished Milner and Prime Minister Borden for assuming West Indian willingness to be an appendage of Canada: “The falsehood is being steadily propagated that the British West Indies would view such a transference with favour, and the next move will probably be a tentative suggestion by Sir Robert Borden that Canada is willing to assume her share of Imperial ‘burdens’—at the expense of the West Indian section of the Empire.” Citing articles in the Canadian Press such as “Jamaica Asks to be Joined to Canada” and “Prominent Speakers Claim Island on Verge of Ruin,” DeLisser deduced that “the Canadian looks upon us as shivering orphans, neglected and despised, asking for food and shelter.” If one were to believe the “busy scribes” in Canada, it would appear that Jamaica is “a very fair representation of Darkest Africa.” Milner’s misunderstanding of West Indian conditions and sentiment, on the other hand, was somewhat excusable given his busy schedule. DeLisser was
sure the Colonial Secretary would “drop the Canadian federation idea as though it were blazing hot” when he realized that the West Indies were not far from claiming the right to self-determination.104

Conclusion
Those who debated the problems and possibilities of the union question during the war were not simply responding to the geopolitical and economic pressures of a specific historical moment. They were negotiating the terms on which their particular national or imperial formations would take shape. War contributions were expected to reap postwar dividends for the Empire’s peoples in the form of increased political representation and autonomy. For Canadian proponents of West Indian annexation, acquiring territorial spoils and administering the “backward races” who inhabited them were a means to greater national autonomy in both the Empire and in a broader global context. While Canada’s autonomy in external relations was not officially recognized until the Statute of Westminster in 1931, this development should not be projected backwards to diminish the significance of the war on the national trajectory that many Canadians imagined in 1916-1919.

By the time 1919 drew to a close, the union momentum had dissipated. The war had dealt a serious blow to the civilizing mission ideology, and the protracted process by which colonialism eventually became a dirty word was underway.105 The postwar rhetoric of equality and greater autonomy for all the constituent parts of the British Empire—however conflicted this rhetoric may have been—was incompatible with new colonial acquisitions. In 1919 the ideal of self-determination did not mobilize West Indians to seek immediate independence, but it did mobilize expectations for an autonomous future. The strikes, riots, and general unrest of the immediate postwar period were critical to the development of reform politics and labour organization in the inter-war years. People of colour in the British West Indies fought hard for economic, social, and constitutional reforms, though with limited results. By the mid-1930s, increased material pressures on workers, social and racial discrimination, and the agro-commercial elite’s unwillingness to cede even marginal reforms incited labour rebellions throughout the region.106

West Indians’ growing commitment to reform during the war nonetheless reflected an agenda that was thoroughly incompatible with a Canada-West Indies union. The struggles of West Indians in Canada had exposed white Canadian attitudes toward peoples of colour and had offered West Indians a rude glimpse of life under union. These struggles contributed to an emerging collective consciousness among West Indians that was increasingly anathema to white colonial rule—whether from Bridgetown, Ottawa, or London.

Canada’s evolution in the British Empire was thus not informed solely by the cultural and commercial relations forged with Britain and the other dominions, but by an elaborate web of exchange that brought many Canadians in contact with

104 Ibid.; Daily Gleaner [Jamaica], June 19, 1919.
105 See Adas, “Contested Hegemony,” pp. 31-63.
Barbadians, Jamaicans, and Bahamians, to name only a few. The specificity and variability of these exchanges in different contexts of Empire should remind us to interrogate the apparent affinities that bound the “white settlement” dominions and the metropole together. Indeed, through their movements across the global colour line, West Indians conditioned the discussion about and ultimately quashed the prospect of union. In the process, they altered the path along which Canada’s autonomy was defined and achieved.