Prologue

The Man Out of Place

He is almost completely missing from the annals of the Pan-African movement. The two leading studies of the movement do not even mention him, let alone register or analyze his contribution.\(^1\) A third mentions him only briefly and in passing, devoting four sentences to the pioneer in a book almost three hundred pages long.\(^2\) The great George Padmore, in his Olympian, if polemical, historical overview of the Pan-African movement, correctly registers his name among the New World pioneers of Liberia but has him leading twenty-one African American emigrants to the settlement almost a decade before he actually left the United States—alone.\(^3\) And despite his Jamaican roots and Caribbean allegiance, he is unknown and so unremembered in his native island and the rest of the archipelago. His name is absent from Jamaican and Caribbean history books, and he has no pedestal in the remarkable pantheon—from Blyden to Padmore to Fanon to Rodney—of Caribbean Pan-African intellectuals and activists. It is true that he left the Caribbean at an early age, but so did Blyden, and unlike Blyden he returned to the Caribbean as a young man, in the vain hope of resettling there.\(^4\) Moreover, early in his youth he became fascinated with Haiti and the Haitian Revolution, wrote and spoke about them, and seriously considered and even planned to settle in the “Black Republic” after graduating from college. His interest in Haiti abided with him, even after his emigration to Liberia, to the very end of his days. He is better known in the United States, but not by much; there his image is distorted in much of the historical scholarship, and his true achievements are inadequately recognized and appreciated.

John Brown Russwurm, as I shall demonstrate and argue, deserves better. His pioneering efforts, achievements, and example—as educator, abolitionist, editor, government official, staunch emigrationist, and colonizationist—put him in the vanguard of the Pan-African movement. Moreover, Russwurm’s own internal struggle with the perennial Pan-Africanist dilemma of whether
to go to Africa or stay and fight in the United States was the first of its kind carried out and resolved in the public domain. That struggle was robust and energetic, and its path to resolution and the resolution itself tell much of the times in which he lived and the limited options available to himself and those of the African diaspora who yearned for a full and dignified life as human beings, unencumbered by the horrors of slavery, racism, and white supremacy.

What follows is a brief overview of the life and struggles of John Brown Russwurm, ending with an assessment and determination of his proper place within the Pan-Africanist tradition. This biographical portrait, an entry into the historical record, is especially necessary because Russwurm has had no scholarly biography. It is accompanied by a selection of Russwurm’s own writings that not only lay bare the trajectory of his political thinking and contribution but also provide an important perspective on the challenges and struggles of his time. The selection begins with his writings on Haiti while he was still a student at Bowdoin College and follows his output through his editorship of Freedom’s Journal, ending with his work in Liberia on the Liberia Herald and additional material from his governorship of Maryland in Liberia. Though enormously rich and varied as well as impassioned and powerfully analytical, Russwurm’s writings have never been previously anthologized. But the combined neglect and ignorance of his writings do not reflect their intrinsic and historical value. Russwurm’s writings in fact provide a unique entrée into the thinking of one of Afro-America’s first organic and most gifted intellectuals as he struggled with the problems of black life from the early national to the antebellum period and searched for their resolution. Russwurm was also one of the most remarkable and valuable witnesses of the age. He occupied a unique and unparalleled point of view on the American republic, the African diaspora, and the wider drama of the times. In the age of black slavery, Russwurm was not only freeborn but also among the first African Americans to receive a university education; he had lived in the Caribbean and Canada before moving to the United States; he was an unblinking observer of and commentator on the condition of African Americans as well as a courageous fighter against white supremacy and for black emancipation and uplift. In short, Russwurm’s was a distinct and articulate voice, one especially worthy of our attention and respect.

John Brown Russwurm, then, has two broad objectives: to provide a biographical portrait of the man, including a critical assessment of his contribution, and to give readers an opportunity to more readily and directly peruse and engage with Russwurm’s own writings, in their richness, complexity, passion, and pathos, as well as their insights and blindesses, strengths and weaknesses.