The man who would become Malcolm X was dissembling.

He was in Manhattan during World War II and was being interrogated by the authorities about the possibility of his being conscripted by the military, a prospect he surely wanted to avoid. He knew that “Army Intelligence” in his own Harlem was quite sensitive about the possibility of inadvertently drafting pro-Tokyo Negroes. So, he said, “I started noising around that I was frantic to join”—i.e. the “Japanese Army.” Yes, he enthused, “I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!” At that point “the psychiatrist’s blue pencil dropped and his professional manner fell off in all directions.”

His dissembling had to be taken seriously for at least two reasons: in preceding years Japan had made aggressive overtures to win over the much beleaguered U.S. Negro community and the Japanese military had made startling advances in the Asia-Pacific theatre as Malcolm Little was speaking. Moreover, this future leader was hardly singular in his reluctance to join the war-torn military. By late 1943, African Americans comprised a whopping 35% of the nation’s delinquent registrants and between 1941 and 1946 thousands of black men were imprisoned for not complying with the Selective Service Act.

It may have been asking to much to expect persecuted U.S. Negroes to unquestioningly throw in their lot with the nation that had pulverized them. In short, pro-Tokyo sentiment was perceived as widespread among U.S. Negroes: it was seen as propelled by guilty fear that this oppressed group would seize the moment of war for retribution and retaliation. Even the staid NAACP leader, Walter White, felt constrained to deny the “astounding and disturbing statement”
that “‘actual proof was available to support the fact that the NAACP was receiving considerable subsidy from the Japanese government…’” 3 Though if White had been more forthcoming he would have admitted that he had termed Yasuichi Hikida, as “‘my very good friend’”; this “friend” had attended Columbia University and was thought widely to be one of Tokyo’s chief U.S. agents. 4 He lived in Harlem, wrote an unpublished biography of the Negro hero, Toussaint L’Ouverture of Haiti and had one of the finest collections of books on African Americans in private hands. 5

Walter Karig, who had made the initial inquiry about Tokyo-NAACP ties that White was forced to deny provided a tepid affirmation: “I have no knowledge that the NAACP is receiving ‘substantial’ or any other kind of subsidy from the Japanese,” he said with what seemed to be something less than ironclad support. 6

If Karig had been witness to disturbing events in Illinois, his most febrile fears would have been confirmed. It was on or about 7 December 1941 when Willie “Pretty Stockyard” Cole rushed through the front door of Nelson Sykes’ Brass Rail Saloon at 329 East 47th Street in Chicago, yelling frantically, “‘the colored folks have bombed Pearl Harbor! The colored folks have bombed Pearl Harbor!’” In reply an inebriated “Broke” Hunter standing at the end of the bar interrupted Willie’s screaming with his own, shouting, “‘I know the white folks are going to give me a steady job now.’” He was interrupted in turn by “Fat” Clark proclaiming “‘Amen…..I recall my father tellin’ me how much overtime money colored people made during the last big war…’” The more elevated Dempsey Travis, in assessing these excited responses, calmly declared that “some Blacks experienced a vicarious pleasure from the thought that ‘Charlie’ was getting his ass kicked by some ‘colored’ people.” He recollected that in South Chicago there
was a group “known as ‘the Moors’ who were actually pro-Japanese”—and they were hardly alone.  

7

The attitude glimpsed by Travis was not unique: in January 1942, a meeting of U.S. Negro leaders voted 36 to 5 with 15 abstaining that their community was not 100% behind the war against Japan. A 1942 poll conducted among Black New Yorkers found that 18% said they would be better off under the Japanese and an additional 31 percent declared that their treatment would be the same and only 28% said it would be worse. 8 An undated U.S. military investigation (that was likely conducted during the height of the Pacific War) found that “between eighty and ninety percent of the American colored population who had any views on the subject, at all, were pro-Japanese.” 9

8

The young Brooklyn pianist, Randy Weston, recalled later that after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “the Americans”—meaning Euro-Americans in the U.S.—“were so shook up they panicked, and since they needed all the workers they could get for the war effort, for the first time they allowed blacks to work in the defense plants…..before that, all black folks were allowed to do was sweep floors and be servants, they weren’t even allowed to drive a truck,” meaning now they could “make some steady money,” providing further incentive for African Americans to be thankful to Tokyo. Subsequently, this illustrious keyboardist observed that during the war “my brother-in-law had told me about how the Japanese snipers” in Okinawa “wouldn’t mess with the brothers,” meaning African Americans like himself. That was an incredible experience.” 10

9

In Washington, D.C. Elmer Carroll was judged to be a “draft dodger” after war erupted, though he said he was—said a journalist—“brother to the Japs and refused to fight against them” in the face of a judicial argument that sought to convince him futilely that the Moslems (the
religious grouping to which he presumably belonged) were a “fighting people and had been so for thousands of years…” and, thus, he should have hesitation to join the U.S. military. Months later in Kansas City, a reporter discussed “a group of turbaned ‘Moslems’” who “were jailed” for evading conscription. “All of those arrested gave ages approaching 100, contending this made them immune to draft registration.” In New Orleans simultaneously there took place what was described as a “draft evasion riot” with 21 Negroes arrested. The defendants were said to be members of the “International Reassemble of the Church of Freedom League” and contended that military service was contrary to their faith. Ethelbert Anself Boraster, 40, a native of Belize and an alien was depicted as “general messenger” or leader of the group. This was occurring as numerous Euro-American men were seeking deferments from military service, all of which was potentially compromising to national security.

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W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and other Negro leaders may have had conflicts among themselves but all looked to Tokyo as evidence for the proposition that modernity was not solely the province of those of European descent and that the very predicates of white supremacy were senseless. However, what was striking about pro-Tokyo sentiment among African Americans was that it cut sharply across class lines: it was prevalent in the intellectual salons of Harlem and the plants of East St. Louis and the fields of the Missouri bootheel stretching south into Arkansas and Mississippi...

Du Bois, the “Father of Pan-Africanism,” saw the beginning of the end of white supremacy in Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905 since, as he wrote, “The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem” and as the world changed, even the staunchest Jim Crow advocate would be compelled to retreat. A few years later, Du Bois argued
that “‘the fight of the Japanese for equal rights is similar to the fight the Negroes are making for their rights’” an opinion he persisted in holding.  

Washington expressed a view shared widely among U.S. Negro leaders, when in 1912 he told an inquiring Japanese journalist: “Speaking for the masses of my own race in this country I think I am safe in saying that there is no other race outside of America whose fortunes the Negro peoples of this country have followed with greater interest or admiration,” i.e. “in no other part of the world have the Japanese people a larger number of admirers and well-wishers than among the black people of the United States.”

Besieged African Americans felt the need to look abroad for succor and support. On 2 July 1917 gangs of Euro-American men roamed through East St. Louis and systematically beat, shot, hanged and immolated African Americans. Their homes were torched. Some were lynched from telephone poles, left to sway in the breeze. Yet there was a dialectic at play for the Negro charged with spearheading defense of the besieged in this industrial town—Le Roy Bundy—later joined Marcus Garvey’s forces, quickly becoming “Knight Commander of the Distinguished Order of Ethiopia,” then the Jamaican leader’s “First Assistant.” During the 1917 unrest, Bundy was accused of being “commander of a Negro army,” that was well-armed. Soon East St. Louis was to become the de facto capital of pro-Tokyo sentiment in the U.S., with those with past ties to Garvey serving as chief lieutenants.

In response, Tokyo catered to U.S. Negroes, knowing well how Jim Crow had wounded them. Reportedly, it was during the early 1920s that the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo ordered that all captains of ocean going Japanese passenger ships afford African Americans preference in every way connected with their travel on these vessels.
The Negro musician, Buck Clayton, was struck by this preference when arriving in Japan during the interwar years. The Negroes “were the only ones allowed to disembark. All the white passengers had to remain aboard while the ship was in dock,” he marveled, “while we Blacks were allowed to go ashore and have a ball.”  Of course, even the U.S. authorities knew that in Oregon “Japanese hotels” were sites where “Negroes have been permitted to sleep at the same time being disallowed in white hotels.” The Negro journalist, Lucius Harper, obligingly admitted that “the black man” was accorded “equal privileges in many of the cafes and hotels under [Japanese and Japanese American] ownership.” Negroes accustomed to Jim Crow penalties, especially and onerously when travelling, were justifiably impressed by this turn of events.

Sensing the direction of political winds, U.S. military aviation strategist, William “Billy” Mitchell, wrote in “confidential” terms of the “Pacific Problem.” The “policy of the United States and in fact of all the white countries having their shores washed by the waters of the Pacific Ocean, is to keep their soil, their institutions and their manner of living free from the ownership, the domination and the customs of the Orientals”. For “eventually in their search for existence the white and yellow races will be brought into armed conflict to determine which shall prevail.” Thus, he continued menacingly, “we are faced with a problem much greater than it appears on the surface, that of maintaining not only the political supremacy but also the very existence of the white race…. Hence, he concluded, “the rumblings of this coming strife have ceased to be inaudible whispers but are the loud protests of the Japanese people, the vanguard of the Asiatics, over the exclusion laws, the land laws and their unequal treatment at the hands of our citizens.”
Yet, pro-Tokyo sentiment among African Americans represented a severe challenge to U.S. national security as constructed by the likes of Mitchell. As historian John Dower has argued, though Berlin is considered popularly when the question of racism and World War II is contemplated, it was Tokyo that “stirred the deepest recesses of white [supremacy] and provoked a response bordering on the apocalyptic.”

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T.C. Dunson was in a unique position to be aware of these factors. By May 1942 he had escaped—barely—to New Orleans from Singapore, where he had attained a measure of success as a dancer. A few months earlier, this African American was leisurely playing mah-jong in this British colony when he heard massive explosions: “‘[I] thought it was an earthquake,’” he said, as panic descended frenziedly on the city. He was in the midst of an invasion by the Japanese military: “‘they said they had come to liberate the Asiatics from the ‘white devils’’” invoking rhetoric that had become increasingly popular among Black Nationalists, in New Orleans not least. He was agog to see that some of the previously preening European colonizers were so shocked by the “‘strain’” of this abrupt turn of events, that they simply “‘went insane.’”

But even this hardly prepared him for what he was to espy. As his eyes scanned the skies one morning, it seemed as if it were raining men. What he saw were “‘bodies of [dead] British soldiers on parachutes. They were nothing but bloody masses of clothes and pulp’,” tossed from planes by Japanese military men, determined to impress upon one and all in the most shocking fashion that a new order had descended.

Dunson may have known that New Orleans was one of the many centers of pro-Tokyo sentiment among U.S. Negroes. Presumably he shared this ghastly sight with his fellow Negroes in New Orleans, which could serve to undermine further the magic of white supremacy, which—
ultimately—depended upon the notion that those once known as the “ruling race” were born to dominate. For beyond the shores of the Crescent City, the ugly sights of Singapore had left an impressive imprint upon Africans.

What was troubling to Washington was that Black Nationalist sentiment could act as a transmission belt propelling pro-Tokyo sentiment more generally, potentially jeopardizing important global alliances too. When Marcus Garvey—the Jamaican who came to embody Black Nationalism—died just as world war had descended on Europe, , A.J. Maphike, in faraway South Africa told the left leaning Guardian in Cape Town that this was an “irreparable loss to the African races [sic]” and indicated that his “sixteen year old son” was “named after” the Jamaican leader. 29 About eighteen months later when Singapore fell to Japanese invaders, hundreds of Africans met in this same city and, according to the left-wing reporter present, expressed fervent sentiments that indicated they were “deluded into believing that the Japanese may bring them freedom from colour bars” and “may even wish for a Japanese victory.” 30 Ahmed Kathrada was to become a leader of South African Communists and one of Nelson Mandela’s closest comrades. But as Japanese troops began to maraud, he confessed unashamedly that he “derive[d] great satisfaction from every blow struck by Japanese against the British in Asia…”31

The Communist leader, I.O. Horvitch conceded reluctantly that there was a “fairly widespread…belief that Japan will come to South Africa and free the Non-Europeans [sic]”. 32 Like their U.S. counterpart, Communists in South Africa strained to undermine the appeal of Japan among those of African descent, suggestive of the magnetic attraction of Tokyo. Understandably, the consensus among the leadership of the racist regime in Pretoria during this fraught time was that their greatest fear was an invasion by Japanese forces accompanied by a
hearty welcome from Africans. The shaken South African leader, Jan Smuts, said that he would consider the theretofore unthinkable—arming Africans—to thwart a Japanese invasion, a monumental decision that potentially could imperil white supremacy: and that was precisely the import of the “threat” from Tokyo.

For example, in a 1943 indictment, the U.S. authorities asserted that “at the instigation of the Black Dragon Society of Japan”, an organization of Nipponese ultra-patriots, an alleged “front” group had been organized in “chapters or units” in Chicago; East St. Louis; Cleveland; Shaw and Greenville, Mississippi; Tulsa, Muskogee and Boynton, Oklahoma; Cincinnati and Cleveland; Pittsburgh and Philadelphia; Phoenix; Detroit; Gary; and elsewhere, notably in Dixie. This group had been incorporated as early as 1934 under the rubric “Pacific Movement of the Eastern World,” but it was just one of many pro-Tokyo organizations that had sunk roots among U.S. Negroes and were accused of storing weapons in anticipation of a Japanese invasion.

It was also during wartime that the federal prosecutor recalled a chilling episode from a few years earlier when “to an alarming extent the colored people [were] accumulating arms and ammunition” in downstate Illinois, not far from Cairo. “The white folks were lined up [on] one side of the road,” he recounted, “and the colored folks on the other and they all had high powered rifles.” The “darkies in my hometown,” he recalled, “picked out the farms they were going to take over when the invasion by Japan occurred…” Speaking for the prosecutorial team, H. Grady Vien cautioned, “this is a very secretive matter” that should “not” be “discuss[ed]” with “anyone at all.”

Due south in Grenada, Mississippi, was the headquarters of what was described as a statewide “secret Negro organization formed to ‘end white rule over Negro farmers’,” which had
led to “the death of two white plantation owners at the hands of Negro sharecroppers….”” The “National Federation of Colored Farmers” was being blamed in that hundreds of Negroes had attended their convention in Memphis shortly before this bloody episode. It was unclear if this incident was driven by the rise of pro-Tokyo militancy among Negroes—or vice versa. 38 In October 1942, the FBI office in Memphis stated carefully that there was “no indication of organized sabotage among Negro citizens” and that “Negro leaders were emphatic in their denial of foreign underground activities.” 39 Left unsaid was whether there was “sabotage” that was not “organized” or “underground activities” not directly tied to “foreign” sources.

In Evansville, just north of Dixie, a journalist reported that “sinister rumors of race war were circulated throughout the city.” 40 In Jackson, Mississippi there were resonant fears about what one observer termed the “‘sanctity of white womanhood’” when Euro-American men trooped off to war leaving, it was thought, more Negro men around with unfulfilled fantasies. 41

In East St. Louis, Illinois pro-Tokyo Negroes were accused in 1943 of attempting to blow up the Eads Bridge, which connected this city with the larger St. Louis, Missouri. Their “secret password” was said to be “BYB” or “Black, Yellow and Brown” people united against white supremacy: said one observer, “arrangements would be made for colonization projects”, especially to Brazil, which already contained sizeable populations of Japanese and Africans, and also forged would be “trade treaties between the two races after the Japanese had conquered the United States.” 42

Dixie may have had reason to fret about the proliferation of pro-Tokyo sentiment among Negroes. A presumed “white southern moderate” during the war alleged that “‘like the natives of Malaya and Burma….American Negroes are sometimes imbued with the notion that a victory for the yellow race over the white race might also be a victory for them.’” In fact, says historian
John Dower, “in parts of the American South, fears among white people of a Japanese-Negro alliance were apparently fairly commonplace from the 1930s on…” 43, the Pacific War involved for the most part an inter-imperialist rivalry, as Japan sought to displace European (and Euro-American) colonial powers in Asia and the Pacific, while Berlin—for the most part—attacked sovereign states. This often forgotten factor undergirded pro-Tokyo sentiment among U.S. Negroes, many of whom saw themselves as colonized too.

Of course, Dixie was not alone in apprehension. As is well known, there were ongoing Japanese efforts during the war to destroy oil installations in Southern California and to ignite forest fires in Oregon. There were plans for Japanese submarines—after Pearl Harbor’s devastation—to proceed to the West Coast for similar purposes. 44.

Ironically, Japan’s attack on colonialism, along with the racial challenge that it represented may have inflamed passions even more. Lester Granger of the National Urban League maintained that “We tend to hate the Japanese more than the Nazis,” he said, tellingly ratifying his perception by not referring to “Germans”, “because they are not of our race….” That is, it was harder to object to overthrowing colonialism in Asia—as opposed to objecting to overturning sovereignty in Europe—necessitating more anger directed at Tokyo in order to justify the heavy lift that was war. This was having a paradoxical impact on U.S. Negroes, who previously and often had been conflated with Asians, a reality aided by the tendency of some African Americans to refer to themselves as actually “Asiatic.” For Granger sensed that as hysterical racial chauvinism mounted against Japanese, this was creating a simultaneous backlash against Negroes, though there was a contrasting trend that sought to allay bigotry against domestic “minorities” in the U.S. in the interest of national security. There was a race between these two powerful trends, as their clashing created added friction. 45
The Midwest and the South—and the routes followed by those migrating from the latter to the former—were prime recruiting sites for Negroes inclined to back Japan. Tracing the serpentine course of the Mississippi River from the gulf heading northward in some ways tracks the bloodiness inflicted upon Negroes: this too sheds light on why so many were ready to throw in their lot with Tokyo. As shall be seen, East St. Louis, Illinois and Elaine, Arkansas—restive sites of atrocious post-World War I pogroms against Negroes—were also explanatory factors helping to understand the growth of pro-Japan movements among African Americans. Mississippi had a well deserved reputation as a hotbed of racist chauvinism⁴⁶ and as African Americans fled northward their nervous apprehension was borne by them, making them more susceptible to Tokyo’s appeals.

It is fair to infer that Negroes looked to Tokyo not least to gain backing in the event of another pogrom. It is also fair to suggest that the Pacific War also inscribed another chapter in a long-running story of Negro armed resistance in the U.S. ⁴⁷

If racist rulers in South Africa and elsewhere had been able to consult with their counterparts in the Philippines, their fears would have been substantiated. Manny Lawson, a proud graduate of Clemson University in Jim Crow South Carolina, was captured by Japanese forces in the Philippines and was subjected to the horrors of the brutal “Bataan Death March.” As his group of once haughty Euro-Americans marched—defeated—past sullen Filipinos, he wondered about their “sympathy and loyalty. After all,” he mused, “we had been overpowered and captured by an enemy generally thought to be inferior. Defeated and humiliated, we had been on display as the inferiors. Had we permanently lost face?”⁴⁸ The answer—generally and emphatically—was yes, not just in the archipelago but in countless sites where white supremacy had reigned theretofore, absent a dislodging challenge.
This is a book about pro-Tokyo sentiment, particularly among Black Nationalists—e.g. the precursor of the Nation of Islam; Marcus Garvey’s forces; the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World; the Moorish Science Temple; the Ethiopia Pacific Movement; and those within their orbit (notably the forces that arose in great number during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s, when it seemed that Tokyo would come to the aid of Addis Ababa.) Though it is principally about the response of Black Nationalists, it would be a mistake to view the ideological tendency they have represented as the sole vector of pro-Tokyo sentiment. Instead, they should be viewed as a vanguard force—the leading but not the sole detachment—instead of the exclusive repository of this sentiment; These Black Nationalists were in the forefront. They were the advance guard, the spearhead. They were the trendsetters, the groundbreakers, the opinion molders. However, they were not alone in their fondness for Tokyo. They were able to influence many others.

For the fact is, as shall be seen, some of the most fervent pro-Japanese views came from those like William Pickens, better known as a NAACP leader—and Pickens was hardly alone. Pickens, in sum, was a notorious fan of Tokyo. In 1934 he was, quite typically, in praise Tokyo mode. “Think how these Japanese work!” he exulted to the influential P.L. Pratts of the Pittsburgh Courier. Yausichi Hikida had come to visit him and “had with him a copy of every editorial I have written on Japan and the Japanese question,” all “mounted on paper—evidently from some PERMANENT FILE,” he stressed, “perhaps Hikida’s own file…”

Five years later, Pickens was saluting Tokyo’s occupation of Manchuria. Using the Japanese name for this territory, he argued that “Manchukuo in near future has a much better chance for practical as well as technical freedom in the near terms, than has Abyssinia,” then
languishing under Italian rule. Pickens was among those who were not keen on backing another world war in any case; in 1940 he encountered “‘intelligent’” African Americans who purported to be “happy and hopeful ‘because those white folk are killing each other off….’” in Europe.

Indeed, the ideological tendency in Black America that was most immune to Japan’s charms—the socialist left—was precisely the tendency that received the most adamant and resolute opposition from U.S. rulers, which in a sense, helped to bolster further pro-Tokyo stances. (A similar trend operated in racist South Africa.) This book is only coincidentally about pro-Negro sentiment in Japan. In sum, this is a book about “Trans-Pacific Racism”—not “racisms.” That is, this book only incidentally concerns the pre-1945 chauvinism that was so prevalent among the Japanese ruling elite.

This is a book about the acceleration of “Afro-Asian Solidarity,” a tendency that preceded the rise of Japan—but assuredly this trend attained warp speed in the decades leading up to the final surrender on the battleship Missouri in 1945. This book is also part of a larger argument that I have made over the years: that is, because slavery and Jim Crow—and the malignant attitudes both embodied—were so deeply encrusted in U.S. society, it required external forces, global currents, to alter profoundly this tragic state of affairs.

This is a book about the roots of “Afro-Asian solidarity”, which manifested most dramatically when anti-Jim Crow forces in Dixie creatively adapted the doctrine of “passive resistance” honed in India. However, the taproot and flowering of this capacious phenomenon can be traced to the tie between Black Nationalists and Tokyo during the interwar years—or, perhaps, even back to the 18th century when settlers in North America feared that Japan, then in
self-imposed isolation, was mustering thousands of hard-bitten troops to invade this continent in solidarity with Native Americans.  

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The conflation of Negroes and Japanese was aided by the subordination of the latter, notably along the Pacific Coast, in the years leading up to 1941 and the defining of both as inherently not allowed to enter the hallowed halls of “whiteness.” This tendency was also reflected in the popular genre that was science fiction.  

The revulsion by Euro-Americans toward Japan was so pervasive that even the “Yellow Peril” character that was “Dr. Fu Manchu,” though ostensibly from China—a nation with which Tokyo had warred repeatedly—was often interpreted as being in the U.S. as being Nipponese. 

It remains unclear how many members were enrolled in the PMEW, the Allah Temple of Islam (which became the Nation of Islam, one of the sturdier Black Nationalist formations) and the other pro-Tokyo groups. However, it is fair to suggest (as shall be seen) that they were more popular among U.S. Negroes than their primary ideological competition—those enrolled in the Communist Party. 

For example, in December 1942 F.B.I. Director, J. Edgar Hoover, estimated that in Detroit alone “the combined membership at the peak of these movements,” referring to the PMEW, the Moorish Science Temple, the Eastern Pacific Movement, the organization of the late Marcus Garvey, et.al., “was around 15, 000…..” They were, it was said, “‘actively engaged in an underground pro-Japanese movement….’”  

The membership of the Moorish Science Temple in Detroit alone, according to the FBI in 1943, was “estimated at between four and five thousand….” Overall, said the FBI in 1944, there were 30, 000 believers in the MST “with 11,
000 of them in the Chicago area,” which was hardly minor given that there was pervasive “Japanese infiltration” of their ranks. 65

In the early 1940s a St. Louis journalist reported that several thousand had joined the PMEW there and “tens of thousands elsewhere…” 66 The Black Dragon Society of Japan, the assumed sponsor of many pro-Tokyo Negro groups, was said to have “100,000 followers ready to take up arms in support of a Japanese assault upon U.S. shores,” according to the FBI. 67 In Detroit, Satokata Takahata, a former officer in the Imperial Japanese Army and member of the Black Dragon Society, had a U.S. Negro spouse, Pearl Sherrod and they were the motive force behind “The Development of Our Own”, which partially shared roots with the Allah Temple of Islam of the same city: one press account said that “at one time” TDOO “claimed more than 20,000 members.” 68 In 1943 a judge in the case of pro-Tokyo defendants in East St. Louis said of the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World that “at its peak” the “membership” was “more than [one] million.” 69 Extraordinarily, claimed one observer, “there were about 10,000” members of the ultra-patriotic Black Dragon Society of Japan residing in California “prior to Pearl Harbor….” 70

Of course, it is probably more appropriate to look at these figures as suggestive of the inflamed state of mind of the assessors—borne by a consciousness infected with guilty fear of retribution--more so than the truth of the matter asserted. That is, reflected in these assessments is guilty fear, nervous recognition of how atrociously wrongheaded the maltreatment of U.S. Negroes had been and how this had led the authorities understandably and justifiably to think that this group was ready to take up arms against the state based in Washington, D.C. that had betrayed them and ally with every foreign foe. On the other hand, it would be similarly wrongheaded to dismiss peremptorily the extent of pro-Tokyo sentiment among U.S. Negroes.
It would be similarly foolhardy to downplay the influence or the ambitions of these groups. First of all, they were taken seriously by Tokyo in that officialdom paid close attention to such important issues as the number of African Americans in the military; the racial breakdown of various states; rates of Negro illiteracy and mortality, as well as lists of “influential Negro Leaders” and “important Negro publications.”

Robert Jordan, a leader of pro-Tokyo Negro forces told Tokyo that “we the dark race of the Western Hemisphere through the Ethiopia Pacific Movement….are putting our entire confidence in the Japanese people with the hopes that in the very near future, we will desire a very close relationship with the Japanese government.” On his stationery a Japanese national was listed as the group’s “chief business advisor.” Jordan claimed that he had served with Tokyo’s maritime fleet and had been an agent of Tokyo since 1922; like others in this movement, his comrade, James Thornhill, had been a UNIA member, while others had roots in the Caribbean.

One reason for the difference in membership totals between Black Nationalists and Black Communists is that even during the war, when Moscow and Washington were allied, certain authorities seemed more preoccupied with monitoring Communists than pro-Tokyo nationalists. Certainly this was the case in Alabama when a “confidential” 1943 report from the State Council of Defense, detailed CP activity among Negroes and had nothing to say about pro-Japan forces—even though the former and the Council were presumably sharing the same trench. This was all the more remarkable given that the local press in Montgomery tried to caution that the main danger came not only from the “‘Yellow Peril’” but also from a “‘White Peril’,” i.e. Berlin and Rome. Perhaps, Communists were perceived as presenting more of a systemic threat than pro-Japanese forces who—at worst—threatened mere lives and did not necessarily threaten the all-
important capitalist system. It is also fair to infer that in the war’s aftermath, the concentrated
focus on Black Communists, like a seesaw helped to uplift their major competitor for the title of
champion of a radical reworking of the republic: the Nation of Islam most notably.

The Pacific War as a “Race War” may have helped to motivate a number of Euro-
Americans (and their racial comrades in Africa too) to make the ultimate sacrifice for their
homeland but it did not seem to have a similar impact on their “colored” brethren. During the
height of the war, the Harlem Bard, Langston Hughes, reminded Black Chicago that “the same
American that for generations has mistreated the Negro, lynched him, Jim Crowed him
physically, humiliated him spiritually, packed up all the West Coast Japanese citizens (I didn’t
say citizens—I said citizens) and put them into concentration camps.”

Actually, said Hughes, “what has happened lately to the American Japanese and what has happened all along to us, puts
American Negroes and American Japanese in the same boat.” Likewise, Hughes—and U.S.
Negroes generally—were in the forefront of those raising searching questions about the atomic
bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This concern was not unilateral, i.e. grave concern was expressed at diverse levels in
Japan about the sorrowful plight of U.S. Negroes. Among pro-war factions in Tokyo, this
concern was utilitarian in that it was felt that such expressed sympathy would translate into pro-
Japan sentiment among Negroes with potential far-reaching consequences during war. And even
antiwar activists of the left in Japan too expressed sympathy for the oppressed of North America,
making the cause of the U.S. Negro exceedingly popular across the ideological spectrum in
Tokyo. It was claimed in Tokyo that it was routine in Negro homes to see displayed portraits of
both Abraham Lincoln and Baron Nobuaki Makino, whose proposal for racial equality in
Versailles after World War I, was seen as a step forward not only for Japanese but for U.S. Negroes too.  

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In some ways this is an abortive history in that it focuses on the tremendous amount of pro-Tokyo rhetoric among U.S. Negroes, which was translated into meaningful action only intermittently. But this rhetoric had consequences as the dissembling of Malcolm Little suggested: after all, he was not conscripted and, thus, was unavailable to fight U.S. foes. There were other U.S. Negroes who also were Moslems who were indicted as “draft dodgers” during the war, though the precise number is unclear.  

Retrospectively, it is not easy to gauge the impact of threats by pro-Tokyo Negroes on those thought not to be as enamored with the cause. Apparently, Robert Jordan, a premier pro-Tokyo Negro, had assailed Walter White of the NAACP and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. as “‘Dumb American Negroes’,” who were slated to be “beheaded” because of their unwillingness to break with Washington. A FBI agent claimed that he had attended a party in the home of one of Jordan’s comrades, “where the guests cheered radio reports of [Tokyo] victories”.  

It was hardly reassuring when the mainstream press published lurid accounts during the war of “weird human sacrifices and strange blood rituals” that were “practiced by fanatical members of the [Tokyo]-directed ‘fifth column’” among Negroes.  

One scholar has suggested that Tokyo turned for spying to the “American Negroes”, a massive force of largely disgruntled citizens, many of whom had a special axe to grind.  

This was a common view among many Negroes during the war. “The present Pacific movement and the Ethiopian movement,” said one Negro journalist in 1943 speaking of two of the principal pro-Tokyo groupings, “both are outgrowths of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA”. In fact, “Japanese spies
took full control of the organized mass through their paid Filipino and radical Negro-West Indian henchmen,” both driven by anti-colonial fervor. Tokyo’s main agent among Negroes—Satohata Takahashi—“himself photographed and diagrammed many sections of the United States, in company of various Negro women, of whom he was exceptionally fond;” his “lavish gifts of cash with which he was abundantly supplied won for him innumerable naïve, Negro feminine companions…. For “the American Negro has always been the focal race in Japan’s bid for alliances with darker races of the world…”

After Washington placed inordinate pressure on the Negro press after December 1941, Negro journalists often turned with a vengeance against pro-Tokyo forces previously countenanced. An organ of the Negro press in was quite concerned with the alleged “‘Yellow Peril’ [which] has spread to the black belts of America;” i.e. in Cleveland, there was “discovery of a network of Japanese spies who during the past ten years have been preying consistently”; ditto for “the Negro populations in…..Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Baltimore, Canton, Akron, St. Louis and Detroit….“ The target of concern was the PMEW designed to “transport Negroes to Japan” where “they would be treated as equals, get better jobs and be permitted to marry Japanese women.”

Moreover, pro-Tokyo sentiment was subtle, perhaps unintended, suggesting that it was permeating among U.S. Negroes. When what was described as the “Negro National Anthem,” proclaimed in its penultimate verse, “Facing the Rising Sun of our New Day Begun, Let Us March on till victory is won”, it is probable that a salute to Japan was not the explicit purpose. Still, lyricist James Weldon Johnson had visited Tokyo and like other NAACP leaders, was impressed by what he saw. It was Johnson who contended that Japan was “‘perhaps the greatest hope for the colored races of the world,’” a line that mirrored Tokyo’s precisely.
When one of the leading Negro businesses in the nation—North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company—concluded its “Report to Policyholders” with the phrase, “Facing the Rising Sun”, most likely it was a coincidence that this was congruent with prevailing pro-Tokyo sentiment.\(^8^8\)

Of course, in today’s atmosphere, it is less troublesome and simpler to be accused of being a “coincidence theorist” than a “conspiracy theorist.” In light of U.S. Negroes’ fascination with Japan and their invoking of this island state in order to discredit the essence of white supremacy, it should not be forgotten that African Americans were well aware that the “Rising Sun” was Japan’s key symbol.

The U.S. was in a titanic struggle with Japan—and its allies—and national unity and singleness of purpose was mandatory: at least that was the dominant thinking of the era. The widespread pro-Tokyo sentiment among U.S. Negroes, propelled—as it was—by almost casual brutalization, was corrosive to the war effort and in retrospect could have spelled an outcome different than what occurred in August 1945. Surely, the wiser among us realized that this kind of brutalization must be halted, if only for reasons of national security. Certainly understanding of this complicated process has been hampered by the fact that—reportedly—an estimated 70% of wartime records in Japan were destroyed.\(^8^9\)

The original drafts and memoranda detailing the ouster of Japanese Americans from the West Coast of the U.S. were destroyed during the war too which—for purposes here—is even more unfortunate since such may have been revelatory about this community’s ties to U.S. Negroes.\(^9^0\)

It is easier, as a partial result, to describe these Black Nationalists organizationally, which is the bent in this book. Still, ideologically, it is fair to say that these groups prioritized “race” over class and gender, even when they had a religious orientation. They viewed Euro-
Americans with grave skepticism, with some viewing this community as suffused with devilry. Some privileged Africa, others saw themselves as “Asiatic” and still others thought it would be a worthwhile to carve out a homeland in North America. Fewer still foresaw their redemption emerging in the U.S. as then constituted.

To reiterate, he argument in this book is that just as historians have pointed to the global correlation of forces—the Cold War, for example—in explicating how and why Jim Crow retreated, a similar argument can be made about the Pacific War. Even before the surrender ceremony on the battleship Missouri, the U.S. was moving toward eroding restrictions on voting by African Americans. Generally, the argument about the impact of World War II stresses the sacrifice of Negro soldiers and their reluctance to return to the status quo ante (though this was not the first time such a sacrifice occurred) and the national revulsion after Nazi atrocities were exposed. This is not inaccurate—but the point in these pages is that the Pacific War and Japan’s challenge merits more attention when considering the war’s impact, particularly when one considers what one scholar terms “the new paradigm” which “grants that Japan had a chance to win the Pacific War.” A fortiori, this prospect would have been even more likely if pro-Tokyo plotting by African Americans had gained more traction than it did.

The Negro publisher, Carl Murphy, was aware of this. “I have heard several persons declare that racial antagonisms are increasing” he said in April 1942 “but I know what reforms the necessities of war can bring. I am satisfied that this war means nought but good for all of us. Out of the Civil War we got emancipation. During World War I we moved a million colored people out of the South. Out of World War II I predict will evolve a second emancipation.” “This war will be of transcendental moment to all darker races,” affirmed another important
Negro publisher, Claude A. Barnett: “We do not wish to make it a war of color,” he said utilizing Tokyo’s inflamed rhetoric “but circumstances seem to be doing that for us.” 96

The authorities were well aware of the catalytic role of the Negro press, which they perceived as subversive. 97 It was in 1943 that Barnett complained bitterly to the Attorney General about his federal agency “interfering with the mail addressed” to him; perhaps sarcastically, he told Francis Biddle that he didn’t mind if his mail was opened, as long as it was delivered on time. 98

That is, a long-term problem presented by both slavery99 and Jim Crow100 is that in alienating a substantial percentage of the U.S. population, U.S. rulers made those oppressed quite susceptible to the blandishments of real and imagined antagonists of Washington, to the detriment of national security. By August 1945 this long-term trend had arrived at a crucial turning point. Finally, during the Cold War the edifice of oppression began to crumble—but I argue here that the seeds for this epochal trend were watered vigorously during the Pacific War, when so many Negroes expressed solidarity with Japan at a time when the U.S. was in a death match with this imposing Asian nation.

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After the defeat of Japan, many of the Black Nationalists who previously had proclaimed from the rooftops that they were “Asiatic”, switched seamlessly to declaiming that actually they were not only “African” but more “African” than thou. The pro-Tokyo proclamations of NAACP leaders like William Pickens were also conveniently forgotten. This too was part of the ironic evolution of the man once known as Malcolm Little but, more than this, it is part of the evolution of a people once known as U.S. Negroes who were desperately seeking global leverage to countenance the unfavorable domestic balance of forces they were compelled to confront.
This leads to a final note: Readers should be aware that if I had been alive during the Pacific War, I would probably have clashed ideologically and otherwise with the leading African American characters in this book. This is due in no small measure to the fact that Black Nationalists chose to collaborate with white supremacists to oust African Americans from the U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi sponsored a bill to this effect, which was not only endorsed by leading Garveyites and other nationalists but they also petitioned energetically to insure that his measure was passed. “I have been instructed by Mr. Marcus Garvey of London,” said C.C. Edwards, his colleague from North Carolina, “to petition for the passage of the bill” demanding “repatriation to Africa.”

As a result, when Garvey died, Senator Bilbo—who could fairly be called the “Prime Minister of Jim Crow”—was sorrowful: “I regret more than I am able to say,” he told a colleague of the Jamaican activist, “the sad passing of Marcus Garvey.….” Reciprocally, G.E. Harris of “The Garvey Club of UNIA” in New York City, called Senator Bilbo a “good friend.” Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, a premier Black Nationalist, hailed the Dixicrat as “one of the best propagandists we have ever read,” embodying the “spirit of Jefferson, Madison, Henry Clay, Lincoln,” et.al., which she intended as a compliment.

The Jamaican’s widow, Amy Jacques Garvey, who exclaimed that she was a “stern believer in Race Integrity”, was also “sincerely interested in the success of the Repatriation Bill” since “tension between the races is growing worse[.]” Like others she thought that the migration of Jewish people to Palestine then unfolding was to be emulated by U.S. Negroes migrating “from Gambia to Nigeria…” “The Whites and Blacks who realize the need of separation,” said J.R. Stewart, Garvey’s Cleveland comrade, “must fight side by side until victory is ours.” Stewart was simply echoing the mandate of Garvey himself who had told Senator Bilbo in 1938
that “we shall do all that is necessary on our part in helping you” with this bill, a measure that he “wholeheartedly support[ed].”

Mittie Maud Lena Gordon of Chicago, a leader in this “resettlement” movement, told the Mississippian in late 1939 that “we have held open air meetings throughout the summer,” though the “opposition was great….I have made two trips to St. Louis,” then a de facto capital of this movement. Certainly, I wholly understand why there was a desire to flee the U.S. Ms. Gordon said then of her hometown that “there are 109, 000 families on relief, underfed, dying in a land of plenty”, as “we have suffered seven years in this Depression and it grows worse each year;” thus, “our hearts are broken, our eyes are filled with tears.” This eagerness to abandon the U.S. was heightened by a like wish to “escape the white man’s war,” then erupting in Europe, since “it is not our war….” Because of the “starvation and death we are facing,” she wailed, she planned to contact the American Colonization Society—thought to have been a relic of the 19th century—for assistance and pledged that “we shall do our best to bring a million people to Washington for the next session” to press for the bill’s passage.

Carlos Cooks, a New York based ideological soul-mate of Ms. Gordon informed Senator Bilbo that his hearty band was “ready with speakers to swing into action at any moment” on behalf of this bill. However, the popular columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, J.A. Rogers, captured the sentiment of many Negroes when he hailed those who blocked the attempt of Senator Bilbo to speak in Harlem touting his bill and termed those who “flirt with him” as the “lunatic fringe”. Garvey’s “biggest mistake,” he reminded those with short memories, was “his flirting with the Klan” years earlier and now this gross blunder was being repeated.

Rogers was reacting to the invitation extended by Carlos Cooks of UNIA’s “Advance Division” in New York City, who had invited the Dixiecrat to “come to Harlem and speak to a
Negro audience” in order to “commemorate the birthday of that great father of African colonization, the Hon. Marcus Garvey,” a gesture driven by the assertion that “thousands of inquiries from interested Negroes” had been expressed in support of repatriation. 114

The Bilbo supporters in Harlem may not have recognized that some of Bilbo’s Jim Crow defenders thought that after momentum for “voluntary” resettlement had gained strength, it should then be made—it was stressed—“OBLIGATORY”, which would have meant “DENATIONALIZATION OF NEGROES, including MULATTOES” and then, “in certain cases sterilization” of the remaining population. 115 Writing—appropriately—from the Hotel Robert E. Lee in San Antonio, F.L. Scofield thought that Jim Crow advocates should “start this ‘Back to Africa Movement’ by the repeal of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments as the 18th [pro-alcohol prohibition] was repealed when Public Opinion demanded it;” this—along with the “weapon of divine power”---was needed to “offset this minority Negro vote.” 116 When Wyatt Dougherty of the Educational and Benevolent Society of People of African Descent requested a “broadening of your Proposed Bill” by “adding a feature of giving fifty-dollars per month pension for life to all persons who accept the [Bilbo] Plan and leave the United States for Africa,” the Mississippian was curiously quiescent, perhaps surmising that this amendment sounded dangerously close to a reparative measure. 117

Yet when Senator Bilbo spoke in Congress on his bill, sitting prominently in the Senate gallery was Ms. Gordon, described by a journalist as a “portly mulatto from Chicago;” moreover, she had brought “some 300 of her followers who mostly are on relief (as she is)” along with her. 118

These Harlemites and Chicagoans seemed unaware, as Washington insider, Joseph Alsop, observed in 1938 that “Germany’s race consciousness” was “lauded by Bilbo in [a]
harangue to [the] Senate” on his resettlement bill, which did not bode well for U.S. Negroes.  

By 1944, as the fate of the planet hung in the balance, Bilbo addressed a joint session of the Mississippi legislature, where he seemed to hail Berlin’s fighting prowess while—prematurely—he downgraded and denigrated Moscow. Likewise, though a triumph for the pro-Tokyo Negroes would have unsettled the fate of those like Bilbo, it was this leading Dixiecrat who congratulated the pro-Japan seditionist he called “Captain James Thornhill,” telling him to “keep up the good work.”

Segregationists had difficulty reconciling their more than latent pro-Berlin sentiments with their dearth of sympathy for Germany’s ally in Tokyo. “Hitler was guilty when he hooked up with the Japanese,” said Joseph Edgar of Arlington, Virginia bitterly and “like the rumblings of a volcano getting ready to spring into activity, the violations of the Divine Law of Race Segregation continue.”

Unsurprisingly, the Harlem Communist leader, Ben Davis, shed no tears when Garvey expired; he proclaimed that “it is to the eternal shame and utter bankruptcy of Marcus Garvey, discredited Negro stooge for the pro-fascist [Nevil] Chamberlain government” that the Jamaican “wants the Negro to become partners with a lyncher, a defiler of the Negro people,” words all underlined, probably by Senator Bilbo himself, the target of this radical’s invective.

More than likely, I would have supported the “United Nations”—i.e. the Moscow-Washington-London alliance. However, that leads to a more profound point: history is not merely a story of “good guys” versus “bad guys.” At times—as here—those supportive of the fundamentally flawed cause that was the pro-Tokyo stance during the Pacific War, can nonetheless contribute to a more saintly cause, i.e. the agonized retreat of Jim Crow. Similarly, after the conclusion of the war, the so-called “good guys”—i.e. the European colonial powers—
rushed to re-establish their misguided misrule in Indo-China, Indonesia, and other tortured sites, heightening the agony of millions. Likewise, as I suggest in the following pages, many of these Black Nationalists were quite hostile to the sovereign aspirations of Chinese, blinded as they were by the stunning light emitted by the Rising Sun—but by the 1970s, they had reversed field and were in thrall to Mao Zedong. I hope this book contributes to a more complicated reassessment of U.S. history—particularly-- along the lines sketched in this paragraph.

Actually, the fraught matter of how race was reworked transcends the Pacific War. As I have argued elsewhere, the formation of the U.S. in the late 18th century marked a formal departure from the European practice that designated religion as a fundamental axis of society. That is the good news. The bad news is that “race” became the axis of society. In the 20th century, the rise of socialism sought to demark class as the axis of society and this potent trend helped to erode the more egregious aspects of Jim Crow. However, it needs to be stressed that Tokyo’s attempt to batter white supremacy also contributed to a helter-skelter retreat from the more noxious elements of Jim Crow. However, why this retreat was necessary to the global position of U.S. imperialism was not explained adequately, leading to mass uprisings against the new racial order in Little Rock in 1957, Boston in the 1970s, Yonkers almost thirty years ago and other conflicted sites too numerous to mention. Part of the purpose of this book is to re—contribute to the discussion of why Jim Crow retreated when it did so as to forestall the recrudescence of even more conflicted sites.

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In 1995, the civil rights icon—James Meredith—who was a one man battering ram against Jim Crow when he enrolled as a student at the University of Mississippi in 1962, returned to Japan where he had resided in 1957 at Tachikawa Air Force Base. In 1960, he said with fervor, “I
returned to America inspired by my experience in Japan” determined to “Break the System of White Supremacy in Mississippi and the South”. Like African Americans in previous decades, he too thought that this Asian nation’s very existence was a refutation of the rudiments of white supremacy, providing a lesson well worth studying. Yet even in the final decade of the 20th century, when Tokyo-Washington relations seemed to have normalized, Meredith felt “certain that when World War Three takes place in the future, our enemy will be Japan…” 126 I hope he is wrong—about a cataclysmic war with Japan as antagonist—and I trust the following pages will provide material to forestall such a catastrophe.