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 Carol Anderson
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Introduction

De-Centering Du Bois

I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it's
 for ... or against.

– Malcolm X¹

Nearly a decade ago, while beginning the archival research for this book, I happened to run into historian Gerald Horne at the Library of Congress. We chatted a bit and then he asked me what I was working on. I said, “The NAACP’s anticolonialism.” He smiled and half jokingly replied, “Well, that’s going to be a short book!”

Horne would have been right, if the archival record confirmed the orthodoxy that has reigned for more than forty years. The standard, accepted saga is straightforward. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) anticolonialism began and ended with co-founder W. E. B. Du Bois, whose second stint at the Association was only four brief, tumultuous years, 1944–1948. In that short space of time he brought an enormous wealth of insight, experience, and intuitive brilliance to the subjects of colonialism, economic exploitation, and Africa.² His intellectual and anticolonial light was so bright – blinding almost – that it has appeared to many scholars that when he left the NAACP, he took the fire and the sun with him. All that remained of the Association

¹ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 421.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace*, introduction by Herbert Aptheker (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1945; reprint, Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1975); Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: International Publishers, 1946).

was a darkened, desiccated husk. The NAACP was just a shell of what it used to be and certainly a mere shadow of what it could have been. The ouster of Du Bois, these scholars contend, not only hobbled and destabilized the Association's anticolonialism but also had a disastrous effect on the struggles for liberation in the United States.

That powerful, haunting story has been reaffirmed in book after book, article after article. The problem is that it cannot withstand archival scrutiny.

I liken this conundrum to the troubles of physicists and astronomers using the Ptolemaic, earth-centered model of the universe. The only way that the planetary system could hang together was through continual mathematical gymnastics: recalibrations, ellipses, equants, and epicycles to account for astral movements that simply made no sense otherwise. Ptolemy's geocentric system, for example, could not explain lunar orbits around Jupiter. Only when scientists placed the sun, not the earth, at the center and posited gravity's elliptical orbit did the model begin to correlate fully with the evidence. Further, this change led to subsequent breakthroughs that moved knowledge well beyond the solar system and into the galaxies. In the end, de-centering the earth did not trivialize the importance of the planet; it just made it possible to see that there was more to explore.³

Similarly, this book had to de-center Du Bois to make sense of a phenomenon that by all accounts was not supposed to be there. Just as the telescopes trained on the moons orbiting Jupiter called into serious question Ptolemy's geocentric model, rigorous research in the records of the NAACP undermined the assertions of scholars that the Cold War, anti-communism, and, finally, Du Bois's 1948 ouster had silenced the NAACP. For here was this organization, working in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s within an array of transnational alliances based in Cape Town, Mogadishu, Jakarta, and London, as well as with allies and covert supporters in the White House, State Department, and United Nations (UN), wading into liberation campaigns against the South Africans, the British, the Italians, the Dutch, and the French. How was this even possible given the Ptolemaic construction of black liberals' dormant Cold War anticolonialism?⁴

³ James M. Lattis, *Between Copernicus and Galileo: Christoph Clavius and the Collapse of Ptolemaic Cosmology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴ Erik McDuffie, "Black and Red: Black Liberation, the Cold War, and the Horne Thesis," *Journal of African American History*, 96, no. 2 (Spring 2011), 236–247; Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War*,

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Penny Von Eschen, Gerald Horne, James Roark, and others have all described how the lure of civil rights bait, the toxin of anticommunism, and the pressures of the Cold War led the NAACP to abandon those struggling to be free from colonial oppression. Although Horne invokes the image of Faust selling his soul to Mephistopheles, the better metaphor might be Judas Iscariot accepting a few pieces of civil rights concessions in exchange for betraying global liberation struggles.⁵ Scholar Robert L. Harris Jr., quoting Du Bois, notes that the NAACP “traded ‘breaks in the American color line for acquiescence in American and West European control of the world’s colored peoples.’”⁶ Historian Francis Njubi Nesbitt explains, “Truman’s concessions to civil rights groups and his strong-arm tactics against the left convinced moderate groups, such as the NAACP ... that ‘full American nationalism apparently promised greater immediate rewards than racial internationalism.’” The Association, in Nesbitt’s estimation, decided that it was “safer to conform to the new order” than to fight for “Du Bois’s leftist and anti-imperialist politics.”⁷

Indeed, Gerald Horne writes that the NAACP’s growing anticommunism led to “the purge of W.E.B. Du Bois ... and ultimately the retreat of the association from its deeply engaged and left-leaning posture on the global stage.”⁸ Murali Balaji notes that the firing occurred because Du Bois had attached “himself to radical causes that promised immediate liberation for colonized and exploited people,” whereas the Association’s policies “only confirmed his long-held suspicions that the NAACP’s

1944–1963 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem? The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988); Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Kenneth Janken, “From Colonial Liberation to Cold War Liberalism: Walter White, the NAACP, and Foreign Affairs, 1941–1955,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21, no. 6 (November 1998), 1091; Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 19.

⁵ Horne, *Black and Red*, 56, 57; Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 116, 143, 144; James Roark, “American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1945–1953,” *African Historical Studies*, 4 (1971), 265–266.

⁶ Du Bois quoted in Robert L. Harris Jr., “Ralph Bunche and Afro-American Participation in Decolonization,” in *The African American Voice in U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II*, ed. Michael L. Krenn (New York: Garland, 1999), 177.

⁷ Frances Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946–1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 10.

⁸ Horne, *The End of Empires*, 180.

activism would only go so far.”⁹ Similarly, James Roark insists that, “[j]ust as Du Bois’ hiring during the [Second World] war had symbolized the new international commitments of the association, his firing gave notice of a return to domestic concerns.”¹⁰

The invisible but all-powerful force shaping this narrative’s trajectory is Du Bois’s assertion that the Association was just a “bourgeois set-up afraid to do anything that is not respectable” and that the organization had jumped on President Harry Truman’s “bandwagon” and shackled the NAACP to the “reactionary, war-mongering, colonial imperialism of the present administration.”¹¹ Du Bois looms so large in the assessment of the Association’s anticolonialism that scholars have adopted his framework seemingly without interrogation. They have not, for example, seriously asked about the biases inherent in a critique from an octogenarian who was essentially thrown out of the organization he helped found. They have not stripped away his anger to analyze the essence of his criticism. Instead, historians have jumped down the same semantic rabbit hole that Du Bois did, one that equates anticommunism with support of colonial regimes.

The syllogism is simple and, in the end, historically misleading. The logic chain’s first premise is that the U.S. government was staunchly anti-communist. The second, based on the first, is that the Americans were determined to keep the Soviet Union away from any territory it did not already control. The third contends that to contain the USSR, the United States decided to prop up and prolong the rule of European colonizers throughout the globe. Once scholars have established the imperialistic outcomes of an anticommunist foreign policy, the NAACP’s own anti-Marxist bent invariably leads to the conclusion that the Association was in league with the United States to do whatever it took to keep the USSR out of Africa and Asia, even if that meant aligning with Europeans at the expense of colonized peoples’ freedom.

⁹ Murali Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil: The Politics and Friendship of W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 246.

¹⁰ Roark, “American Black Leaders,” 265.

¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois to George Padmore, April 7, 1949, *Papers of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), Reel 64, microfilm, (hereafter *Du Bois*); W.E.B. Du Bois to Walter White, November 14, 1946, Box A241, File “William E.B. Du Bois—General, 1946,” *Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter *Papers of the NAACP*); Du Bois to the Secretary (White) and Board of Directors of the N.A.A.C.P., memo, September 7, 1948, Box A241, File “W.E.B. Du Bois – General (Jan–Sept 1948),” *Papers of the NAACP*.

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Horne emphasizes, for example, that “[t]he Association’s move ... from militant anti-imperialism to virulent anticommunism, ... was a tortuous path.” The NAACP’s “board liberally populated with fat cats and ideological biases” received “a defined attitude and certain civil rights concessions at home in exchange for steely eyed anticommunism abroad.”¹² Von Eschen writes that “in accepting the legitimacy of the United States as the leader of the free world,” the NAACP had severed “the argument that linked the struggle of black Americans against Jim Crow with that of Africans against colonialism.”¹³ With the onset of the Cold War, Von Eschen continues, the NAACP developed “a new exclusive focus on domestic discrimination and silence on foreign policy issues.”¹⁴ Roark similarly explains that the pervasive anticommunism that enveloped the Association and others in the African American political center meant that “most American black leaders had abandoned the cause of the world’s colored peoples.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, the virulence of the anticommunist witch hunts in the United States, coupled with the historical sexiness of heroes who challenged the era’s reign of fear, has led scholars to render the anticolonial trail of the Association and its allies so small that it was almost invisible, while disproportionately magnifying the footprints of the Left. A preponderance of the scholarship has, indeed, focused on leftists, such as Paul Robeson and Du Bois, who were hammered hard by the Second Red Scare. These men, and many more like them, embodied a commitment to anticolonialism as well as a deep affinity for communism as a panacea for the world’s ills. Their unshakable faith in the power of communism (and especially the Soviet Union) to destroy imperial rule and end the subjugation of hundreds of millions of people of color led historians to conflate communism and anticolonialism and treat these two separate phenomena as synonymous. In other words, scholars have made the mistake of believing that communism was the sine qua non of anticolonialism.

In the end, therefore, the semantic rabbit hole that made the NAACP a standard bearer for imperialism and the Soviet Union synonymous with anticolonialism greased the way into a Wonderland where the Association disappeared, like the Cheshire Cat, from the histories of colonial liberation struggles. Roark makes clear that while the NAACP crumpled beneath the

¹² Horne, *Black and Red*, 56, 57.

¹³ Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 143, 144, 116.

¹⁵ Roark, “American Black Leaders,” 265–266.

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weight of Cold War pressures, a “handful of black leaders, mostly on the left, refused to make the switch in 1947 ... these black leaders redoubled their attack on Western capitalism and racism.”¹⁶ Based on the power of that narrative, which has been repeated so often that it has become truth, subsequent works have focused on the nexus between black radicals and colonial liberation movements and, in the process, silenced the important work of anticommunist, anticolonial groups. Nesbitt, for example, simply dismisses the NAACP and other “moderate groups” and then asserts that African Americans’ drive against global racial oppression could only have “emerged in radical black politics of the 1940s.”¹⁷

If that is the case, then how do scholars explain the NAACP disrupting a brokered deal in 1949 to carve up North Africa and the Horn of Africa among U.S. allies? How can historians account for the actions of an Association board member who, in 1951, sowed so much anticolonial discontent in the Fourth Committee of the UN that the British were convinced that it was a seminal moment that would make continued colonial rule infinitely more difficult? Jupiter’s moons are crying out for an explanation. In fact, historians Brenda Gayle Plummer, Jason Parker, and James Meriwether as well as political scientist Alvin B. Tillery Jr. have begun to provide great insight into the contributions of black liberals to a series of liberation strategies.¹⁸ It is time now to train the telescope on how the NAACP was able to operate, sometimes quite effectively, in a political environment that had toppled other anticolonial activists.

If we de-center Du Bois, the organizing methods the Association used to discredit the legal and normative pillars that propped up the “white man’s burden” come into view. The NAACP, working – often through the UN – in partnership with a range of liberal organizations and indigenous freedom fighters, took direct aim at the tenets of national sovereignty, domestic jurisdiction, white supremacy, unsubstantiated claims of uplift,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, viii; also see Thomas Dyja, *Walter White: The Dilemma of Black Identity in America* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 177.

¹⁸ Jason Parker, “‘Made-in-America Revolutions’?: The ‘Black University’ and the American Role in the Decolonization of the Black Atlantic,” *Journal of American History*, 96, no. 3 (December 2009), 727–750; James H. Meriwether, “‘Worth a Lot of Negro Votes’: Black Voters, Africa, and the 1960 Presidential Campaign,” *Journal of American History*, 95, no. 3 (December 2008): 737–763; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Alvin B. Tillery Jr., *Between Homeland and Motherland: Africa, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Black Leadership in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 72–98.

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and geostrategic necessity to help render colonialism anachronistic and unacceptable.

De-centering Du Bois also allows for greater insight into how the goal of human rights diverged from that of colonial independence although they were coterminous and, initially, intertwined. The Association posited a “third way” of postcolonial nation building, one that sought to curb the potential excesses of private capital accumulation and avoid Soviet-style institutions while infusing human rights into the process of modernization. The NAACP argued that the ravages of capitalism without the benefits of democracy and human rights would be so exploitive that people of color would be unable to find any sense of justice and hope in their societies, moderate nationalist influences would be discredited, political extremism would take root, and the end result would be more violence, more deprivation, and more human rights violations.¹⁹ This framework emerged from a series of meetings with Africans and Asians in the early 1940s. During the Second World War, indigenous leaders, such as Nigerian Nnamdi Azikiwe and President-General of the African National Congress (ANC) A. B. Xuma, envisioned a decolonized world predicated on political independence *and* human rights. Within a few short years, however, those interwoven fibers of national viability frayed in the course of UN battles, concerns about development aid, and the Cold War. As a result, colonial independence was, in many ways, “fast-tracked,” while human rights were left at the UN’s starting gate.

De-centering Du Bois underlines self-determination, not communism or the Soviet Union, as the gravitational force pulling hundreds of millions of people into struggles against better financed, better equipped colonizers. The core, guiding principle was a people’s right to choose their own government. That dogma allowed the NAACP’s anticolonialism to have a sense of clarity not mired by ideological haze. For example, as long as “the wishes of the inhabitants” were denied, the Association refused to back Ethiopia’s bid to absorb Eritrea, derided

¹⁹ Walter White to Chester Williams, October 25, 1948, Box 181–8, Folder 3, *Papers of Rayford Logan*, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC (hereafter *Logan-MSRC*); Walter White to Arthur [Spingarn], n.d., ca. February 1950, Box 6, File “Spingarn, Arthur B.,” *Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon White Correspondence*, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT (hereafter *White Papers*). See Barbara F. Walter, “Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 41, no. 3 (2004), 371–388.

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the Soviets' imperialistic power play in North Africa, and mounted a full-throttle campaign against an American-backed plan to dole out Libya, Somalia, and Eritrea to U.S. allies. De-centering Du Bois provides insight into the ways the NAACP adapted its strategies when its access to the White House was closed off after Dwight D. Eisenhower came to power. During Truman's presidency, the Association leadership had managed to obtain various appointments to the U.S. delegations to the UN. The NAACP's foreign policy consultants also attended State Department briefings and gained access to decision makers to wield some influence.²⁰ The Eisenhower years, however, were very different. The NAACP, especially because of its high-profile work on destroying legal racial segregation in the United States, was persona non grata at the White House. Although the propaganda nightmare that was Jim Crow forced the Eisenhower administration to search for African Americans to appoint to UN delegations, it soon became clear that no matter how strong, viable, capable, or even Republican a candidate might be, if he was "an NAACP man," he was not getting through the vetting process.²¹ The Association leaders were, therefore, instrumental in the shaping of another organization that could focus on decolonization, the American Committee on Africa (ACOA).

In short, de-centering Du Bois opens up a universe of African Americans' anticolonial efforts that have heretofore been ignored or written off as "ritualistic" anomalies.²² It renders visible the all-

²⁰ See, for example, the discussion to invite Haitian President Paul Magloire for a visit to the United States, Dean Acheson to the President [Harry S. Truman], January 17, 1952, Box 42, File "State Department Correspondence, 1951–52 [5 of 6]," *Papers of Harry S. Truman: White House Confidential File: Confidential File*, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Independence, MO (hereafter *HST:WHCF:CF*); Walter White to Dean Acheson, January 31, 1952, Box A617, File "State Department: General, 1952–54," *Papers of the NAACP*.

²¹ R[obert] E. H[ampton], Memorandum for the Record, January 13, 1958, Box 4, File "Be-Bl," *Papers of John Foster Dulles, 1951–59*, Personnel Series, Special Liaison Staff Sub-series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS (hereafter *Dulles:PS:SLSS*); Robert E. Hampton, Memorandum for the Record, January 10, 1958, Box 4, File "Be-Bl," *Dulles:PS:SLSS*; David S. Smith to Mr. Hanes, memo, June 29, 1954, *Papers of John Foster Dulles, 1951–59*, Personnel Series, Chiefs of Mission Sub-series, Box 3, File "Subject File (Strictly Confidential) Negro Problem," Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS (hereafter *Dulles:PS:CMS*); Telephone Conversation Re: UN Delegation, July 20, 1953, *Papers of John Foster Dulles, 1951–59*, Telephone Calls Series, Box 1, File "Telephone Memos (Except to and from White House) July–Oct. 31, 1953 (5)," Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS hereafter *Dulles:TCS*).

²² Roark, "American Black Leaders," 263.

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important constellation of alliances and strategies used to dismantle colonial empires. It opens up lines of inquiry about human rights and decolonization that have not been explored in this context.²³ And it reveals how that activism was motivated by a force more powerful than communism: freedom.

²³ Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Samuel Moyn, “Imperialism, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Human Rights,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (in Reinterpreting American History), eds. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock, series ed. Wm. Roger Louis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159–178.

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I

Rising Wind

It won't hurt you guys to struggle for the things you love to talk about.
 After a while you'll get a revolutionary conscience.

– George Streater¹

By 1919, thick, dark smoke billowed out of Europe's crumbling empires. The flames of self-determination, sparked by the Wilsonian principles of the First World War, licked the outskirts of Europe itself, then spread to Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. The colonial powers tried to douse it, harness it, defuse it, but the ember of independence still burned. All of the maneuvering at Versailles had not quelled the fervor.²

In fact, the horse trading at the peace talks, the bartering of peoples back and forth, and the refusal of the great powers to acknowledge racial equality as a bedrock principle of international law and peace added a powerful accelerant to the quest for freedom.³ As African leader Lamine Senghor remarked in 1927 at the conference of the League Against Imperialism, “We have assembled to defend ourselves against these injustices”: that “the imperialists very democratically reserve the right to sell an entire Negro people to another imperialist,” that “you are forced to work ten hours a day in the ... African sun, and can only earn 2 francs,” that confessions for so-called crimes are extracted through methods

¹ George Streater to Henry Moon, n.d., Box 5, File “Streater, George & Olive,” *Papers of Henry and Mollie Moon*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (hereafter *Moon Papers*).

² Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 119–126.