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**AFRICAN AND
AFRO-CARIBBEAN
REPATRIATION,
1919–1922**

Black Voices

Jane L. Chapman



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1919–1922

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This book is dedicated to those people, past and present, who fight or have fought discrimination in all its forms.

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Interrogating Neglected Voices

Abstract This introductory chapter introduces three main arguments: first, that the sheer volume of racist expressions was accompanied by expansive articulations of black protest, underlining the importance of close reading of language in communications. Secondly, the centrality of economic factors is illustrated by human stories, in particular, lack of employment and appallingly financial hardship. Thirdly, there is a trans-national flavour to the particular communications and events which resonated throughout Britain and elsewhere in its empire. Scholars have addressed this change of attitude towards black empire contributions in Britain by reference to the race riots, but have not analysed in any detail what happened afterwards, especially in terms of individual voices. This study emphasises use of language by acknowledging letters and petitions as works of non-fiction literature.

Keywords Racist expressions • British Empire • Black communities
African and Afro-Caribbean • Repatriation • Protest

This study represents the first systematic attempt to analyse records of people of African and Afro-Caribbean origin who put into writing their circumstances and views in relation to repatriation during the aftermaths of the First World War in Britain. Personal stories provide historical evidence of post-conflict readjustment, and a change in attitude at the end of the war. Such information is timely within three different present

contexts: firstly the continuing imperative to rediscover and recuperate black history¹; secondly because questions of repatriation and immigration continue to be an issue throughout the world; and thirdly because the attention of research and commemorations for the Centenary of the First World War² is now turning to the aftermaths of that conflict.

Furthermore, the three main arguments presented in the pages that follow all evoke comparison not just with existing scholarship but also with some present-day discourses worldwide. Firstly, the sheer volume of what we now refer to as racist expression simultaneously accompanied by expansive articulations of protest, underlines the importance of close reading of language in communications and archival study. Secondly, the centrality of economic factors is illustrated by human stories, in particular, lack of employment, appallingly financial hardship, and desperate living conditions. Thirdly, there is a transnational flavour to the particular communications and events in this study, resonating throughout Britain and elsewhere in its empire.

The analysis focuses on 1919–1922 as a specific period of history, which involved wide-ranging adjustments after the First World War, in this case centring exclusively on African and Afro-Caribbean experiences during the *aftermaths* of the 1919 race riots.³ This study demonstrates not only how non-white soldiers, particularly those from the Caribbean and West African regions of the British Empire, experienced a profound change of attitude in Britain, but more importantly, in terms of the emphasis of the research presented, their reaction to it.

At present, there are no volumes that address in detail this specific topic in this specific manner, yet it has wider relevance in the light of post-war racial violence in the United States, as well as the social upheaval in Britain, the Caribbean and elsewhere during this period. Although fighting on the battlefields had ceased, the struggle for rights and representation intensified. This work provides a microstudy of the complexity of the new post-war First World War world, which was the most troubled period of peace that the world had hitherto seen (Cabanes 2014⁴).

Thus the findings in this study add to the body of research on the aftermaths of the First World War, black studies, and the origins of diaspora. Articulations featured here have implications for concepts of citizenship, adding an ethnic dimensions to the author's 2013 work on 'cultural citizenship'. In addition, communications in this book add to transnational memory studies as an emerging field in which the aftermaths of the First World War are under-explored.

APPROACH

Periodisation within specialised studies often moves from the Great War to the interwar years more generally, either nationally or transnationally (see, *inter-alia*: Mazón and Steingröver, ed. 2005; Wilder 2005; Makalani 2011; Adi 2013; Ezra 2000; Dewitte 2007; Chickering and Förster 2003; Matera and Kingsley Kent 2017⁵). This study argues for the aftermaths of war to be given more attention as a distinctly defined period of post-conflict adjustment in which individual voices need to be highlighted. African and Afro-Caribbean contributions towards the war effort were accepted (if not openly valued), their loyalty anticipated and their contribution acknowledged—at least by present day writers (Fryer 1984; Costello 2015; Olusoga 2014; Smith 2015a, b⁶). However, when the conflict ended ex-soldiers and merchant seamen were expected to return to their native islands, usually without financial support or much help. Scholars have addressed this change of attitude towards black empire contributions in Britain by reference to the race riots (Jenkinson 1987; Fryer, *op.cit.*⁷), but have not analysed in any detail what happened afterwards, especially in terms of individual voices.

One of the main purposes of this study is to emphasise the use of language, and in the process, to acknowledge letters and petitions as works of non-fiction literature.⁸ Using individual appeals and records, research addresses: who were affected and how did they articulate their concerns in writing? A full examination of individual accounts provides first-hand insight into how physical and political oppression was specifically understood by members of the African Caribbean community. Written evidence will be scrutinised for aspects such as a sense of either empowerment or disempowerment, visibility, self-esteem, and economic struggles for survival. Through the highlighting of keywords, phrases and themes as qualitative critical discourse analysis, text-based understanding of the political/societal implications of writings is enhanced (after Fairclough 1995⁹). This technique is equally valid for analysis of the significance of language in news texts (after Fowler 1991¹⁰).

The articulated views of people of Africans and Afro-Caribbean origin have sometimes survived directly in the form of statements given to the authorities and letters of appeal against repatriation, which could involve separation of men from wives and families. Analysis of these texts addresses how intrinsic economic concerns were to the process of black articulation, providing examples of the inequality of imperial balances of