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INTRODUCTION

Roi Ottley’s War: Black Internationalism
and the Long Freedom Struggle

In 1958, *Sepia*, a photojournalism magazine dedicated to chronicling the achievements of African Americans, presented its readers with a curious query: “What became of Roi Ottley?” The question must have struck Ottley as at least a little odd. At age fifty-two, he was a fixture in Chicago journalism, having been a columnist for both the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Tribune*. His show on the Windy City’s radio station WGN was wildly popular. He’d dabbled in African American history and biography. He was completing his first novel. *Sepia*’s implication that his celebrity was in eclipse must have stung the proud Ottley just a bit.1

In fact, Roi Ottley’s career trajectory had been erratic. During the 1940s, he seemed to be everywhere. He burst onto the national literary scene in 1943 with his best-selling description of life in African America, *New World A-Coming*. Ottley parlayed that success into a military commission and a prolonged stint as a war correspondent, publishing regularly with the labor newspaper *PM* as well as the *Pittsburgh Courier*. After the war, he continued to cover international events for the *Courier*, and experiences from his travels provided the raw material for his book *No Green Pastures*, a comparative study of American and European race relations that was published in 1951.

Unfortunately, critics and readers alike rejected Ottley’s controversial book, and work as a freelance writer was difficult to come by. To make matters worse, his personal life was in chaos. Those factors contributed to his decision to leave Harlem and relocate to Chicago in search of a new start. Ottley found success there but on a far more local basis than before. Rarely did he find himself in the national spotlight: hence *Sepia*’s curiosity as to his whereabouts.

Two years after the magazine piece was published, Ottley was dead of a heart attack at the age of fifty-four. Since then, his writing has receded from historical memory. To be sure, his most-cited work, *The Lonely Warrior*, a biography of *Chicago Defender* editor Robert Abbott, is still used by scholars in the field, and *New World A-Coming* garners the occasional footnote. In addition, some of his magazine pieces from the 1940s have been anthologized. But for the most part, Ottley and his work have been forgotten.2

Trends in the literature of American race relations and recent archival discoveries have made necessary a reevaluation of the man and his writing. Ottley was one of the great observers. As a reporter, columnist, and editor at the *Amsterdam News*, he was a ubiquitous figure in the Harlem of the 1930s. He was witness to the depths of the economic catastrophe there, and he documented and at times participated in the great political groundswell that swept through the community and much of Black America during the Great Depression. He covered the rise of his childhood friend, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and wrote about the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. He reported on the protests surrounding the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and on the Spanish civil war. He was involved in labor politics as well as the political organizing surrounding the National Negro Congress (NNC).

When his politicking cost him a position at the *Amsterdam News*, he went to work for the Harlem branch of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), where he supervised a team that included Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Waring Cuney, Ellen Tarry, and Dorothy West. His employment with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) came to an end when the growing anticommunist hysteria cost his division precious funding. After World War II began, Ottley used his connections in organized labor to land a position as publicity director of the National CIO War Relief Committee. Commissioned as a captain in the U.S. Army in 1944, he spent the remaining war years covering events in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.

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In recent years, historians of the civil rights movement have focused increasing attention on the decades immediately preceding the so-called classical period of the movement, which began ostensibly with the 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. They have attempted to break free of traditional periodization and geographical constraints that have rooted histories of the movement in the South.3 We have also witnessed the emergence of an important literature that has “internationalized” the struggle and viewed it through a global lens of anticolonialism, anti-imperialism, and antifascism.4 Top-down histories that begin with federal intervention no longer suffice. The role of organized labor and Left political parties and organizations, the energies unleashed by the New Deal, and the galvanizing effects of World War II are all seen as components in what historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall has termed the “long civil rights movement.”

In Hall’s formulation, this preclassical period saw the development of a coalitional politics that fused civil rights agitation with radical demands for economic democracy and social justice. The period offered a window of opportunity when it appeared the politics of the Popular Front, energized during the war by the rhetoric of anti-Nazism and the “Double V” campaign (victory over fascism abroad and racism at home), as well as by FDR’s prolabor policies, would bear fruit. It was also a moment when African Americans drew very public connections between American racism and the anti-Semitism of the Nazi Holocaust and tied their own struggles at home to national liberation movements around the globe. As Martha Biondi has noted, 500,000 African American troops deployed in Africa, the Pacific, and Europe had ringside seats to witness the crumbling of Euro-


pean colonialism. Many thousands returned home believing that Jim Crow would be the next to go.

But ultimately, these “civil rights unionists” and “Black internationalists” went down to defeat. In the immediate postwar period, conservatives turned anticommunism into a “mass-based weapon” and bludgeoned the labor-Left coalitions. According to Glenda Gilmore, southern anticommunism in particular “eviscerated postwar social justice movements and truncated the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1950s.” Southern conservatives painted the civil rights movement red and broke apart the Popular Front coalitions. The movement that did eventually emerge out of the Black church was stripped of its economic and public policy goals and had a far narrower political agenda.

This revision of the traditional civil rights narrative is built on a wildly diverse and often exciting literature, but it is a synthetic framework and not without its critics. Some have noted that in their zeal to roll back temporal restrictions, historians of the long movement have homogenized an often conflicted and paradoxical politics, subsuming it under the heading of the “Black freedom movement.” The willingness of some to move the Communist Party to the center of the narrative rankles those scholars who would privilege other liberal and noncommunist radicals. For me, the question can be boiled down to what constitutes a movement. To argue that the racial politics of the 1920s and 1930s constituted a movement implies a political coherence that did not exist. Those early decades were marked by significant institution building in the Black community but also a politics of shifting coalitions that would coalesce around particular issues and then break apart. Everywhere, there was evidence of a rising political

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7. Gilmore, Defying Dixie, 8.
8. The most far-reaching critique of the emerging literature of the “long movement” is Eric Arnesen’s “Reconsidering the Long Civil Rights Movement,” Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society 10 (April 2009): 31–34. Arnesen takes note of the imprecision of the attempts to reperiodize the movement, worrying that by continually pushing back the genesis of the civil rights movement, scholars risk homogenizing an extremely “messy” and contentious politics. Unfortunately, however, much of Arnesen’s criticism is ideologically motivated. He singles out Glenda Gilmore’s Defying Dixie for particular criticism for its emphasis on the role of the Communist Party in this early movement politics. He claims that her focus excludes liberals and noncommunist radicals and cites A. Philip Randolph as a case in point. It is a curious choice, given that Gilmore dedicates long sections of her narrative to Randolph’s efforts, and although she certainly privileges the Communist Party, she hardly shortchanges noncommunist activists. Arnesen challenges the “celebratory” tone of what he clearly considers Left scholarship but implies that all might be well if historians of the long movement would just celebrate someone else. Regardless, Arnesen does highlight important epistemological questions that scholars wrestling with this framework are going to have to tackle.

[ 4 ] INTRODUCTION
consciousness. But African American leaders also struggled to find the issues and strategies that would serve as a catalyst to unity.

World War II provided that catalyst. The piecemeal assault on Jim Crow gave way to unified demands for the desegregation of American society as African Americans at the grass roots organized to end racial discrimination in employment, education, and the range of public accommodations. The global fight against fascism provided a dramatic counterpoint to the groundswell at home. Black leaders tied southern racism directly to Nazi ideology, and for a time, Jim Crow was thrown back on its heels. One of the major players in this muscular new politics was the African American press, which often chose advocacy over mere reporting and became the unofficial mouthpiece for an energized movement. Journalist Roi Ottley was an observer of and participant in many of the dramatic events of the interwar period. Then, in 1943, he went to Europe and North Africa to cover the deployment of African American troops. Ottley became more and more certain that the war would undermine Europe’s colonial empires, and he was equally confident that the victory over white supremacy abroad would empower civil rights activists at home. This volume is the first collection of his work from this period.

Vincent Lushington “Roi” Ottley was born in Harlem on August 2, 1906. He was the son of Jerome Peter Ottley and Beatrice Maud Brisbane. Ottley’s parents were members of the Caribbean diaspora that carried nearly 40,000 immigrants of African descent to Harlem between 1900 and 1930. His father, born in 1882 on the island of Grenada, and his mother, from St. Vincent, both migrated to the United States in 1904. Family lore held that they met on the ship that took them to their new lives. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Caribbean basin was swept up in vast economic dislocations and labor unrest. That turmoil sparked considerable demographic upheaval as the immigrants sought out new employment opportunities. Many were drawn to labor in the burgeoning Panama Canal Zone and then moved on to the United States. Others skipped that Central American way station and directly pursued America’s urban promise.

West Indian immigrants had a powerful effect on Harlem race relations. Unlike many Europeans during this last great age of immigration, the Caribbean migrants tended not to be agriculturalists. They had higher educational attainments, and many were skilled workers. Historians have noted the

seemingly ubiquitous presence of West Indians in the leadership of American radical organizations. Hubert Harrison, Richard B. Moore, Cyril V. Briggs, W. A. Domingo, Grace Campbell, and of course Marcus Garvey, just to name a few, rose quickly in Harlem’s rough-and-tumble political world.

Most of the new arrivals, however, were not particularly political. They instead wanted only a better life for themselves and their families. Jerome and Beatrice Ottley fit most comfortably in this category. Jerome had an indomitable work ethic. He toiled as a handyman doing odd jobs, and when time permitted, he took business classes at a neighborhood high school. According to one source, by 1916 he had accumulated enough credits to graduate. Soon, he was making a living brokering real estate and selling insurance, while Beatrice worked as a domestic to supplement the family income.11 By the early 1920s, after years of scrimping and saving, Jerome Ottley hung out his own shingle, opening a real estate brokerage in Harlem. He focused on the elite neighborhoods of Sugar Hill and Striver’s Row. At the end of the decade, he could boast to his son that he was managing as many as 100 properties.12

By any measure, Roi Ottley was raised as a child of privilege. The family lived in a very comfortable brownstone on Striver’s Row. And young Roi was pampered by his parents, especially his mother. Longtime friend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., remembered that the first time he encountered Ottley as a small child, he turned and asked his buddy W. C. Handy, Jr., “My God, is that a boy or a girl?”13

Growing up, Ottley ran with a pack of friends whose names read like a who’s who of Harlem society. Along with the future congressman Powell and Handy (the son of “Father of the Blues” W. C. Handy, Sr.), there was also Thomas “Fats” Waller and Frankie Steele, a future physician. The members of the group were nearly inseparable. A precocious and curious bunch, they formed themselves into a club called the Young Thinkers, which met frequently at Powell’s father’s church, the formidable Abyssinian Baptist. Ostensibly, they envisaged the organization as a discussion and debate society, and they competed against other debate teams in Harlem, including the prestigious Beaux Arts Club.14 But according to Powell, the group had another preoccupation. In the den they set up underneath the

12. Jerome P. Ottley, Sr., to Roi Ottley, April 21, 1928, in Roi Ottley Collection, St. Bonaventure University Archives, Friedsam Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY.
porch at Ottley’s home, they would discuss books pilfered from family elders and “read all the pornographic literature we could beg, borrow or trade. This was our club.” It is certainly no surprise that sex might capture the imagination of growing young boys, but it proved a particular temptation to Ottley and his friend Powell.

Ottley came of age in the 1920s, when the so-called Harlem Renaissance was at its peak and the “Negro,” as Langston Hughes has written, “was in vogue.” The influx of migrants from the South, the Caribbean, and Africa swelled Harlem’s already overcrowded neighborhoods. The African American population of New York City exploded during the first thirty years of the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1920, it increased 66 percent to 152,467. From 1920 to 1930, that population increased 115 percent to 327,706. And Harlem, as historian David Levering Lewis described it, “seemed to flash into being like a nova.” It was the sound of the “Black Mecca” that Ottley remembered: “From the windows of countless apartments, against the dull red lights, silhouetted figures rocked and rolled to mellow music. Harlem was dancing to the syncopations of Fletcher Henderson’s band and listening to the moanin’ low of Bessie Smith. Urchins were happily tricking dance steps on the sidewalks. Laughter was easy, loud.”

Harlem in the 1920s had a singular energy, but it also wrestled with the paradox that so often comes with the trappings of success. Yes, the arts, literature, and music flourished. The community was a political hothouse that spawned some of the greatest African American leaders of the century. But its uncontrollable growth laid the foundations for a great human tragedy when the economy collapsed and the high hopes of the decade gave way to futility and misery.

For young Ottley and friends, however, New York was an enormous playground. They attended elementary school at Harlem’s P.S. 5. When they were not solving the world’s problems as members of the Young Thinkers, they played church-league basketball for Abyssinian Baptist’s championship team. In the early twenties, they matriculated at Textile High School. Ottley and Powell were extremely popular. They ran track together, and in 1926, Ottley earned local fame when he won the Citywide Sprinting Championships.

15. Powell, Adam by Adam, 26.
But it was the social swirl of what Ottley termed Harlem’s “era of noisy vitality” that really appealed to the boys. Ottley wrote in nearly ecstatic tones about that period in his life. From his vantage point, it was a time of great prosperity, when “money seemed to flow from everyone’s pockets as easily as laughter from their lips.” The streets were filled with the sort of spectacle that was guaranteed to capture the imaginations of young teenage males. Ottley always had an eye for the day-to-day ephemera. He described the street-corner preachers and food vendors, the “policy kings” and prizefighters. He was drawn to the ostentatious living of the “theatrical people” and cultivated a lifelong passion for jazz and musical theater. He saw Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson on the stage and went with his family to revel in the silky tenor of Roland Hayes.

As he got older, he frequented the clubs and speakeasies—places such as Smalls’ Paradise—to hear the jazz musicians “take a Boston” (improvisatory leads) and to dance the “bump” and the “mess-around.” And then there were the “house-rent parties” that were the entertainment of choice for the Black working class. A mere 15 cents earned a person entrée into a near-empty apartment with an old box-beater piano in one corner and pots of chitterlings and pigs’ feet on the stove. “Shorties” (quarter pints) of corn whiskey were dispensed from a makeshift bar, and of course all proceeds went to pay the rent to the landlord the next day. The house-rent parties attracted a very different clientele than the clubs and theaters of the main Harlem thoroughfares. They attracted what Ottley called a “large transient trade” of Pullman porters, truck drivers, and domestics who wanted to take advantage of the short break in their workweek and dance until dawn on Sunday mornings whenever they could.

It wasn’t all Jazz Age revelry for the young Ottley. Although his political awakening would come later, at the trough of the Great Depression, Harlem was a political incubator in the 1920s. There were street-corner orators aplenty. Socialists and Black nationalists alike competed against jackleg preachers and assorted cult leaders for the souls of struggling Harlemites. But it was Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that made the biggest impression. Ottley was fourteen years old when he witnessed the massive procession of Garvey’s 1920 Universal Negro Convention wind its way through the uptown streets. He and his

20. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 63.
friends watched from the roof of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and the scene made a dramatic impression on him.

In his later writings, Ottley often adopted an easy, flowing style that moved deftly from the colloquial to the formal. When he wrote about politics, there was always a hint of sarcasm in his tone. Few were spared in his critiques, including his friend Powell, who, late in his life, was left wondering what exactly had happened to their close friendship. Marcus Garvey, by contrast, received a grudging respect. Ottley did poke a little fun at the pomp and circumstance of the Garveyites, and he was critical of what he characterized as Garvey’s “anti-mulatto campaign” against the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). But he recognized that for significant elements in Harlem and across the Black world, Garvey was immensely important. He gave people hope. “The cotton-picker of the South, bending over his basket, the poor ignorant worker of the Delta, crushed beneath a load of prejudice, the domestic of the city trudging weary to white folks’ kitchens, and even the peasant of the Caribbean islands, dispossessed of the land, lifted his head and cried, ‘Let’s go to Harlem and follow this Black Moses!’” Ottley recognized that the kind of fanaticism that men such as Garvey inspired was nearly always their undoing. He himself was no militant and certainly not a nationalist; in fact, he was relatively conservative in his personal politics. But he understood that Garvey energized a grassroots following that would, by the 1940s, account “for much constructive belligerency today.”

In 1926, Roi Ottley parlayed his success on the athletic field into a full scholarship to St. Bonaventure University (SBU) in Olean, New York. The Franciscan institution, nestled in western New York’s “Enchanted Mountains,” seemed an odd choice for such an ardent and confirmed urbanite. Local universities had expressed interest in the young sprinting champion: St. John’s, New York University (NYU), and Brooklyn College had offered scholarships. However, two of Ottley’s New York friends—Charlie Major and Gus Moore—had been contacted by St. Bonaventure’s athletic director, Father Cyprian Mensing, and were headed west. When he, too, received a telegram from Mensing offering an “unconditional track scholarship,”

23. Ibid., 75–76.
24. Powell, Adam by Adam, 23.
26. Ibid., 81.
27. Clipping, New York Amsterdam News, September 15, 1926, in “Vincent and Jerome Ottley’s Memory Book,” Roi Ottley Collection, St. Bonaventure University Archives, Friedsam Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY.
Ottley decided it was time to experience life beyond the confines of Harlem and New York City. Perhaps his decision to go to Bonaventure was influenced by his friend Powell’s decision to travel upstate to Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. Regardless, from 1926 to 1928, Ottley was a proud St. Bonaventure man.

It is testimony to his athletic ability that he was sought out along with Major and Moore, both of whom were world-class athletes. Major was born in the Bahamas and moved to New York when he was thirteen. During his career on the track, he won two National Amateur Athletics Union (AAU) championships and a Melrose Games championship, as well as both New England and New York Metropolitan Games championships. He was also a national champion high jumper in 1928. Major won a coveted spot on the 1928 Olympic team but was unable to compete due to injury. Eventually, between 1933 and 1934, he coached the St. Bonaventure track team. Similarly, Gus Moore was a dominant runner and one of only a few nationally who could sometimes defeat Major. In 1926, he placed third at the national championships. He left St. Bonaventure in 1928 and for the next two years competed as a member of the U.S. National Cross Country team. Along with Ottley, Major and Moore were among the first African Americans to attend the university, and for the short time they were together, the triumvirate dominated the regional track and field world.28

St. Bonaventure might have been isolated in a rural part of the state, but it had a rich and varied social life—and it did not take Ottley long to find his place there. His scrapbooks are full of clippings, handbills, notices, and ticket stubs. He was a charter member of the school’s University Club, which listed among its activities “entertaining pretty women.” He also helped to charter the Dumas Club, a group ostensibly created in the service of the performing arts; the fact that the members listed their “club yell” as “booze, booze, booze!” would lead one to believe that perhaps they had other interests as well.29 Although the African American community in New York State’s western counties was comparatively small, Ottley wasted no time in finding female companionship. His scrapbooks feature photographs of young women in Olean and Ellicottville, New York, as well as friends in nearby Bradford, Pennsylvania. Powell was a frequent visitor at SBU, as was Frank Steele, who was going to school not far away, at Alfred

29. “Vincent and Jerome Ottley’s Memory Book.”
University. So despite his rather obscure locale, Roi Ottley seems not to have had much difficulty in maintaining an impressive social schedule.

But Ottley’s time at SBU was not simply spent engaging in undergraduate debauchery or in athletic competition. His years at Bonaventure also marked the beginnings of his intellectual awakening. Overall, Ottley was a solid B student. In the two years that he was at the school, he enrolled in a classic liberal arts curriculum. He excelled in geometry, biology, trigonometry, and Latin. He was a voracious reader, listing Rafael Sabatini, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Booth Tarkington, Edith Wharton, Jack London, and Walter White as his favorites. He commented in his scrapbooks about how much he enjoyed Professor Enright’s English courses. It appears that Enright and Father Gerald McMinn, academic vice president and dean of arts and sciences, were the first to encourage Ottley to write.

The future journalist availed himself of multiple opportunities to learn his craft. He churned out articles, reviews, columns, and editorials for the campus newspaper. In one notable piece that was proudly displayed in his “Memory Book,” Ottley assessed the cultural and intellectual life of the school and found it lacking. He urged the formation of debate teams and literary clubs. As an athlete, he argued that a true education had to develop mind, body, and spirit. Along with his journalistic output, Ottley was a frequent contributor to SBU’s literary journal, The Laurel. He also avidly drew cartoons and comic strips.

Ottley looked back fondly on his years at St. Bonaventure. He told interviewer Dexter Teed that he found no racial prejudices there but was accepted at all social gatherings. His success as an athlete gave him a certain prominence. According to Teed, “He forgot he was a Negro.” Unfortunately, that acceptance did not follow him when he transferred to the University of Michigan at the beginning of his junior year. Nothing in Ottley’s papers or published writings explains the decision to leave Bonaventure, but he may have been lured by promises from the Michigan track coach because he did compete as a sprinter. He also roomed with future Big Ten and world 100-yard dash champion Eddie “Midnight Express” Tolan. Ottley majored in literature, with a concentration in journalism, and he pledged the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. But the overt racism he encountered at the University of Michigan was a rude awakening. He was forbidden to join any of the debating societies, and he was excluded from the drama...
Years later in an interview with historian Richard Bardolph, Ottley remembered always feeling like the odd man out. According to Bardolph, while at Michigan Ottley was “affably tolerated as an eccentric Negro who had yet to learn his station.” It is no surprise that his Michigan sojourn lasted only one year. He dropped out and returned to New York.

Upon his return, Ottley worked a series of jobs and took classes at schools across the city. He studied playwriting at Columbia and writing for magazines at City College. At NYU, he attended a lecture series by James Weldon Johnson entitled “Negro Contributions to American Culture,” which surveyed African American poetry, literature, and folklore. Ottley was much influenced by Johnson’s ideas, and eventually, he would produce two collections on Black history: Black Odyssey: The Story of the Negro in America, published in 1948, and the posthumous collection (published in 1967) entitled The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History, which he edited with William Weatherby. Ottley even did a semester of law school at St. John’s before realizing that writing was his one true passion.

Unfortunately, however, without a college degree and with little experience, professional writing jobs were difficult to come by. Ottley meandered through a series of day jobs. He worked variously as a bellhop, a soda jerk, and a railroad porter — and he was lucky to find those jobs. The Harlem he left when he went away to school was no more. The Great Depression exacerbated the economic and social problems already in play during the 1920s, and the results were disastrous. The community already suffered from overcrowding and poor housing conditions, high rents, high food prices, limited access to manufacturing jobs, and a heavy reliance on unskilled labor. As unemployment rose, wages declined. The economic collapse of the 1930s created a perfect storm of misery. Unemployment topped 25 percent. Applications for public assistance, already high, doubled between 1925 and 1930. Private relief agencies saw demand increase by as much as 75 percent. Harlem’s churches stepped in to try to stem the tide by providing food and rudimentary health care, but they were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Of course, the economic turmoil was heightened by racism and ongoing discrimination.

Roi Ottley had a spectacular vantage point for observing the suffering.

34. Ibid.
In 1932, he went to work for the New York Welfare Department as a social worker. He spent his days processing relief applications and trying to find aid for the flood of poor surging through his office. He remained at the Welfare Department until 1937, and in the evenings and on weekends, he helped to administer the relief programs at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. What he witnessed during these years both moved and enraged him. He described the members of the growing underclass as the “slum-shocked.” Most of them, he believed, had come from the South as migrants, only to find a “new life . . . composed of greasy and rundown tenements in filthy and evil-smelling, littered, crowded streets.” They came looking for hope. Instead, they “became the bulk of destitute slum dwellers.” Their situation was beyond desperate.

Those who came to Harlem lived in unheated railroad flats typical of thousands in the Negro communities of the nation, with dank, rat-infested toilets, footworn nondescript linoleum, dirty walls ripped and unpainted, and roaches creeping about the floors and woodwork. From dark unlit hallways came musty odors mingling with the smell of cooking. Ever present was the cacophony of grinding jukeboxes, squalling infants, and angry argument. For all this, white landlords had the effrontery to hang signs on the buildings specifying, "FOR SELECT COLORED TENANTS ONLY.”

To Ottley’s thinking, it was no surprise that these conditions provided the dry tinder that exploded into violence on the morning of March 20, 1935, when the Harlem riot buffeted the city. Ten thousand people rampaged through the Harlem streets, destroying millions of dollars in white-owned commercial property. Three were killed, thirty were hospitalized, and over a hundred arrests were made. The violence rang a stark warning bell that was heard across the country.

Also in 1932, Ottley finally convinced the editors of Harlem’s Amsterdam News to give him some newspaper assignments. As an avid theatergoer and former sportsman, he began by writing an occasional radio and theatrical review column called “Are You Listenin’?” as well as an athletics piece entitled “Sportopics.” Slowly, he worked his way up the ladder, assuming greater editorial duties and eventually authoring the popular human interest column “Hectic Harlem” — the column that established Ottley as a celebrity and an influential commentator on local political affairs. His writing

39. For Ottley’s descriptions of Depression-era Harlem, see Ottley, New World A-Coming, 153–157.
covered a wide range of political, social, cultural, and racial issues. The more he observed and reported on the political action welling up around him, the more often he became involved in that action.

If the Great Depression visited horrible suffering on the people of Harlem, it also created the crucible in which a new brand of activist politics was forged. There were significant resonances with the mass politics of the UNIA and Asa Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. It was a brand of politics that historian Beth Tompkins Bates has termed “new-crowd protest politics,” and it was contingent upon direct mass action. This confrontational brand of politics emerged in the context of the widespread economic dislocations, New York City’s liberal and antiracist political administration, the liberalizing impact of New Deal policies, and a powerful international impulse that saw the struggles of African America in the context of antifascist, anticolonial, and anti-imperialist movements around the world. It was also a political moment when radical and liberal organizations, trade unions, and civil rights groups joined together in a great “popular front” to drive the nation’s political agenda decidedly to the left.41

This new brand of confrontational politics had wide appeal, especially among middle-class Harlemites who struggled to fend off the numerous threats to their quality of life. Many walked willingly into the warm embrace of radical organizations such as the Communist Party; others, including Roi Ottley, were never particularly radical but accepted the political agenda of the Popular Front. Jobs, housing, education, and health care were issues that resonated across a broad political spectrum. Whether it was the battle to increase the number of Black doctors, improve care, and end discriminatory practices at Harlem Hospital or the extended protests against area businesses that refused to hire Black labor, the 1930s was a time of political ferment. And Ottley was often in the middle of these campaigns. When the Citizens’ League for Fair Play decided that its behind-the-scenes approach to persuading white-owned Harlem businesses to hire within the community was not having the desired effect, Harlem’s citizenry took to the picket lines in mass protests. Ottley’s columns on the “Don’t


Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts were among his earliest pieces of substantive journalism.42

The 1930s were also a decade when labor and civil rights issues became increasingly entwined. Until the middle of the decade, unions were notoriously segregated. Twenty-four international unions—ten that were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—excluded African Americans from membership. That brand of labor politics received a considerable jolt in 1935 when the mass-production industries of the AFL bolted and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), welcoming thousands of Blacks into the labor movement for the first time.43 Ottley not only approved of this dramatic sea change in union politics but also experienced it directly. Despite the fact that the *Amsterdam News* had thrown its editorial support behind much of the grassroots politics and agitation sweeping across the Harlem landscape—including the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign—attempts to unionize its own workforce were met with resistance.

In November 1933, members of the editorial staff applied for membership in the left-leaning American Newspaper Guild. In August 1935, guild members began negotiations with the paper for union recognition and a labor contract. In Ottley’s rendering, this was the “first open dispute between organized Negro workers and Negro employers.” In response to the union effort, management locked out seventeen members of the editorial board, including Ottley, and thereby touched off an eleven-week strike. The strikers took to the picket line and were soon joined by guild president Heywood Broun and other top African American political leaders, among them Adam Powell and the NAACP’s Walter White.44

In the context of Harlem politics, Ottley believed the strike forced local leaders to take a position one way or another. Other labor organizations threw their support behind the walkout, including the powerful Harlem Labor Center and Negro Labor Committee. Soon, the strike was a cause célèbre as the representatives of Black and white civic groups sent their members to walk the line. But what made the most powerful impression on Ottley was the number of white guild members from newspapers across the region who flocked to Harlem to man the picket line with their soon-to-be union brothers and sisters. That experience drove home to him the

43. For Ottley’s positive assessment of this new labor politics, see Ottley, *Black Odyssey*, 264–265.
potential of interracial cooperation. He believed that the *Amsterdam News* strike “dramatized the role of the trade union movement in Negro life.”

By October, with protests growing, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia decided to intervene. He asked the principals on both sides to meet with his representative Elinore Herrick, chair of the Regional Labor Board. The paper’s majority stockholders, Sadie Warren Davis and her daughter, failed to show up, but guild president Broun and members of the *News* strike committee provided their side of the story. In the meantime, a boycott of the paper and a campaign to persuade advertisers to pull their ads were having the desired effect. Within weeks of the failed mediation effort, the paper agreed to rehire the strikers and negotiate with the guild for a new contract. But the victory proved to be a double-edged sword. The prolonged battle had decimated the paper’s finances, and in a move that was part revenge and part financial exigency, the owners claimed that the business was no longer solvent. They let go much of the staff, including many of the former strikers, and declared bankruptcy. Roi Ottley was among those released. In December, the Powell-Savory Corporation purchased the *Amsterdam News* at auction. The new ownership agreed to a union contract but was less kind to those who had been involved in the strike. Tensions grew, and eventually several of the strike leaders who were still on the payroll were terminated. According to Ottley, by 1940 only three of the original strikers were still employed by the *News*.

In the short term, Ottley turned to freelance journalism to pay his bills. But in time, he found his way, as so many writers did in that period, into the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writers’ Project. Due to his high public profile and local celebrity, he was made a project supervisor in the Harlem branch of the FWP. The WPA’s arts projects provided a lifeline for thousands in the last half of the 1930s. The New Deal agency paid writers to collect folklore and oral histories and to research and write state guidebooks and histories. Ottley supervised a team of writers who researched and wrote about the African American experience in New York. The writers passing through the Harlem project constituted a literary movement all their own. They included Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, William Attaway, Dorothy West, Waring Cuney, Ted Poston, Ellen Tarry, and Abram Hill.

46. Ibid., 285.
47. Ibid.
Ottley’s tenure with the Harlem project was controversial. He had a brusque, even harsh, management style. One colleague resented the “secrecy” by which he made decisions. He tended to compartmentalize assignments so that the other writers never knew his “comprehensive vision.” Another person called him a dictator. He refused to accept advice or criticism.⁴⁹ Ralph Ellison believed that Ottley only cared about “the bar, the bed, and the table” and that he lacked the sort of political consciousness needed to fully grasp the state of American race relations.⁵⁰ Worse yet was the accusation that Ottley was a womanizer who made inappropriate advances toward his female coworkers.

It is difficult to pinpoint the sources of these frictions. And the case against Ottley is decidedly one-sided, for he never wrote about his time with the FWP. Some of his colleagues—Dorothy West, for instance—were far more complimentary in their assessments of his leadership. As for his management style, Ottley was perceived as arrogant throughout his career, a charge that did not bother him in the least. As Richard Bardolph observed, even as a college student Ottley tended to offend white students due to his independence and his refusal to accept his place in their racial hierarchy. Reared in comfort, he was not often confronted by the hard realities of American racism. One writer has noted that Ottley’s Caribbean-born parents consciously raised both their sons not to accept the racial status quo.⁵¹ For many of his African American colleagues who had been brought up in more meager circumstances and who knew the sting of white supremacy, his abrupt haughtiness and his overt sense of privilege rubbed their sensibilities raw.

Ottley’s reputation as a philanderer was, it seems, well earned. The memoirs of his friend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., are replete with descriptions of their adventures with various chorus girls and others they met during long nights of carousing. In Ottley’s own unpublished writings, wine, women, and song were among the favorite topics. When he was traveling in Europe to cover the war, he was a keen observer of the expressions of sexuality he encountered, and he wrote about them in long letters to his wife, Gladys. As might be expected, Ottley’s proclivities conspired against a stable home life. A brief marriage to Mildred Peyton ended in the 1930s. He

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⁴⁹. The most extended description of Ottley’s term with the Harlem branch is in Lawrence Jackson, Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 200–201. Jackson’s treatment is harsh, and his documentation is thin. Also see Arnold Rampersad, Ralph Ellison: A Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 111–112.

⁵⁰. Ralph Ellison to Richard Wright, August 18, 1945, JWJ MSS 3, Box 97, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

married the white pianist Gladys Tarr in 1941. The failure of that marriage at the end of the decade was one of the catalysts for his move west to Chicago, where he met and married Alice Dungey, the librarian at the Chicago Defender. His marriage to Alice was happy and solid. Nonetheless, having three marriages before the age of forty-five was certainly emblematic of the type of behavior that troubled critics and coworkers alike.

Apart from questions of temperament and personal behavior, another aspect of Ottley’s working relationships in this period bears noting. He was an ardent, even obsessive, self-promoter. As the supervisor of the Harlem project, Ottley felt he had a proprietary interest in the materials compiled by the people who worked for him, and for whatever reason, he believed he could use those materials with impunity. In 1939, when the Harlem branch came under the scrutiny of Martin Dies and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and Ottley suddenly found himself out of a job, he allegedly “borrowed” thirty-five boxes of project research and writing. That material provided fodder for both New World A-Coming and his 1948 foray into African American history, Black Odyssey. The fact that Ottley used the writing of others without attribution was particularly troubling to a number of his former colleagues. Thus, in his review of Ottley’s book, Ralph Ellison lambasted the work, rejecting it as “neither scholarly nor responsible journalism.” According to Ellison, Ottley’s treatment of Black life was exploitive and “sensational,” and the author was “guilty of stylistic clowning.” Regardless, the ethical questions involved were valid, and this was the sort of episode that contributed to some of the negative assessments of Ottley’s character.

Much of the fire directed at Ottley came from Ellison and, to a lesser

53. Ralph Ellison, “New World A-Coming,” Tomorrow 4 (September 4, 1943): 67–68. Ellison was not the only person to question Ottley’s ethical standards. In his autobiography, Mirror to America, historian John Hope Franklin remembered his anger and frustration with a review that Ottley wrote of Franklin’s history of African America, From Slavery to Freedom. At the time of its publication in September 1947, Ottley was working on his own history, Black Odyssey: The Story of the Negro in America. He used his considerable connections to wrangle an invitation to review Franklin’s rival text in the “paper of record,” the New York Times. Ottley took the opportunity to unscrupulously savage From Slavery to Freedom as a “bulky, unwieldy, conventional history, with the studied scholarship of a doctoral thesis. . . . There are neither the sharp, crisp, incisive observations expected of a first-rate journalist, nor the perspective, balance and interpretation expected of the historian.” Franklin rightly felt as if he had been sandbagged by Ottley’s treachery. Writing nearly sixty years later, he was still upset about the episode, and he gave three paragraphs to Ottley in his memoirs. See Franklin, Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 134. Many thanks go to Joel Horowitz for drawing my attention to those pages.
degree, Richard Wright. Questions about Ottley’s commitment to the freedom struggle spoke to ideological differences between the three men. Ellison (in this period) and Wright were clearly further to the political left than the often elitist Ottley. Yet Ottley was at his most politically active at the time, so it is curious that he was accused of lacking the appropriate political consciousness. He had made significant connections to the labor movement as a result of the Amsterdam News strike. He was also present at the creation of the National Negro Congress, a national coalition of civil rights, labor, and church organizations that was charged with coordinating mass action in the face of a worsening economic situation. The NNC was initially chaired by A. Philip Randolph, and for a short time, it was considered one of the spectacular successes of the Popular Front. Ultimately, ideological conflicts and differences over strategy hamstrung the organization. The signing of the infamous Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact in 1939 shattered the unity of the Popular Front coalitions and split the Congress. It also unleashed a wave of anticommunist hysteria that energized the Dies committee and led to the investigations of the federal arts programs that cost Ottley his job. His politics were at least “subversive” enough to draw the ire of federal investigators.

In many ways, the rough-and-tumble politics of the 1930s was but a prelude for the energies unleashed by World War II. The often chaotic political groundswells of the Depression decade, with their shifting political coalitions, created the conditions for a full-fledged civil rights movement. World War II was the crucible in which that unified movement was forged. The red scare that destroyed the Popular Front and threatened the growing ties between labor and civil rights activists ended when the Nazi armies rolled into the Soviet Union. The Popular Front was, to some degree, restored. More important, there was a new political context for understanding the oppression of African Americans. Antifascism, anticolonialism, and antiracism meshed into a political program that picked up momentum


55. See Rampersad, Ralph Ellison, 116–117.
throughout the war. A window of opportunity appeared to have opened. The broad internationalism engendered by the conflict created the conditions for systemic change at home.

Black internationalism did not just magically appear at the start of the conflict. African America was always influenced by events abroad. Intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois had long situated American race relations in the context of a global struggle against colonial domination. In the twentieth century, significant international events energized the African American community, fueled this internationalist impulse, and redefined the relationship between peoples of color around the world, especially in Africa.\textsuperscript{56} In the 1930s, African American newspapers were full of stories about labor unrest from Lagos to Kingston to Delhi. Pan-African activists such as George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah made enormous impressions on Americans such as Ralph Bunche and Paul Robeson. In 1937, Robeson was a prime mover behind the new Council of African Affairs (CAA), which became an important clearinghouse for journalism on African issues.\textsuperscript{57} The Marxist Left and the nationalists found common ground in their confrontation with colonialism, imperialism, fascism, and Jim Crow.

Roi Ottley believed that internationalism’s contemporary roots were to be found in Marcus Garvey’s Black nationalism and the centrality of a mythic Africa to Garvey’s ideology. The success of Garveyism could be measured, he argued, “by a growing world consciousness, expressed in feelings of kinship with colored peoples elsewhere in the world.” When the UNIA collapsed and Garvey was deported, the organization splintered into warring factions. This “world consciousness” receded as the economic crisis forced African America to turn inward and as various nationalist organizations battled for supremacy. Ottley was decidedly negative in his assessments of these “race missionaries” and “race apostles,” whom he dismissed as “loud-mouthed charlatans.” He blamed them for everything from street crime to anti-Semitism. But international events forged a new nationalist consensus that captured the imagination of communities across the country.\textsuperscript{58}

In March 1935, Italian armies invaded Ethiopia. Fascism was on the


\textsuperscript{57} Von Eschen, \textit{Race against Empire}, 14–18.

\textsuperscript{58} Ottley, \textit{New World A-Coming}, 103–104.
march, and an independent African nation was threatened. The war drove home the connections between African Americans and other oppressed peoples. A new attitude toward Africa in general emerged that shifted interest away from discourses of uplift and civilization toward an emphasis on mutual interests. The Black press and churches were relentless in drawing attention to the issue. New organizations were created to raise money and gather relief supplies. As Ottley remarked, “From the beginning the Ethiopian crisis became a fundamental question in Negro life.” It was a litmus test for politicians and the subject of angry debate in “poolrooms, barber shops, and taverns” in cities across America. More important, it set African Americans against their Italian American neighbors. Boycotts and picket lines were started, and street violence occasionally flared. “I know of no event in recent times,” Ottley commented, “that stirred the rank-and-file of Negroes more than the Italo-Ethiopian War. . . . Clearly, Negroes in America had cast their lot with colored peoples elsewhere in the world!”

Much of Ottley’s writing during the war mixed hopefulness with words of warning about the mind-set of African Americans. Many, he argued, remembered the promises made during World War I when leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois had urged the community to close ranks around the American war effort. They also remembered what that support had earned them: violence and degradation. When New World A-Coming was published in 1943, some of its best writing concerned the growing frustration in Black communities across the country. Ottley lashed out at the recurring incidents of violence against Black servicemen in the South, arguing that they had significant consequences for national security as African American citizens questioned why they should be loyal to a government that ignored their oppression. He quoted NAACP executive secretary Walter White as attributing “this countrywide apathy of Negroes to discrimination in the


61. Ibid., 111–112.
Army, Navy, and Air Corps, and especially in the war industries.”62 Worse yet, discrimination created the conditions in which Black communities were increasingly susceptible to Japanese propaganda, not to mention the inordinate value of American racism to the enemies’ efforts in the inevitable battle for hearts and minds. He noted, for instance, that the British unwillingness to discuss independence in India or any of its other colonies was front-page news in Black newspapers. “What this all adds up to in the minds of Negroes,” Ottley argued, “is a pattern of continued white domination of colored peoples. Therefore conflicts between the races are regarded as inevitable.”63

If Ottley’s reporting was news to white Americans, it came as no surprise to the American government, which was becoming more and more anxious about militancy in Black communities. Events had their own relentless momentum. The threatened march on Washington in July 1941 culminated in Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, which allegedly ended employment discrimination in the defense industries and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee to oversee that effort. In December, the Japanese demolished Pearl Harbor, drew the United States into the global conflict, and touched off the calculated hysteria that led to the forced relocation of Japanese and Japanese Americans on the West Coast. And it was not only the Japanese who drew government scrutiny. The director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, and Postmaster General Frank Walker demanded that the increasingly militant African American press be punished for its perceived provocations. An intense internal debate ensued about whether the World War I–era sedition statutes should be applied against select editors in hopes of silencing the Black media. More reactionary voices in the administration wondered if the Black press should be shuttered for the duration of the war. Only the fierce resistance of Attorney General Francis Biddle and the Justice Department averted a nationwide crackdown on civil liberties.64

Undeterred, Hoover launched a massive internal security investigation into “foreign-inspired agitation among the American Negroes.” Commissioned in June 1942 and completed in August 1943, the findings of the investigation were published as the FBI’s Survey of Racial Conditions in the

63. Ibid., 326. For a lengthy digression of the influence of Japanese propaganda among Black nationalist groups across the country, see 327–342.
United States during World War II. The report singled out the Black press as a powerful shaper of African American opinion and a "strong provocateur of discontent of among Negroes." In fact, as many as seven federal agencies launched investigations of the Black press, including the FBI, the Post Office Department, the Office of Facts and Figures, the Office of War Information, the Office of Censorship, and the U.S. Army.

The actual response of the African American media to the war was mixed. Newspapers were attracting an unprecedented readership. In 1940, conservative estimates placed the circulation of African American newspapers across the country at 1,276,000 readers. In 1945, the number was 1,809,000. The Office of War Information estimated that Black newspapers had 4 million readers per week out of a total population of 13 million. Other observers estimated that as many as 6 million African Americans read these newspapers weekly, including one-third of the urban Black population.

It is logical that in certain instances, such as the “Double V” campaign, the press fueled expressions of militancy, which was often the position of many white Americans and the federal government as well. But Roi Ottley, for one, noted that this causal relationship was far more complicated. In reality, there were no calls for noninvolvement in the war effort. Ottley pointed out that even though linking international fascism to America’s system of racial oppression and calling attention to racist excesses at home exhibited a new militant spirit, the “Double V” campaign also urged African Americans to buy war bonds, contribute to blood banks, and participate in civilian defense initiatives and conservation efforts. Historian Lee Finkle has argued that observers of the Black press have often confused militant rhetoric with action. Rather than being a revolutionary force, according to Finkle, African American editors and journalists “[sought] to avoid a direct assault on segregation” and “[embraced] traditional avenues for change.”

In this formulation, the Black press was a clearinghouse for information; it set and advocated a political agenda that attacked segregation at home; and

66. Ibid., 419.
67. Washburn, Question of Sedition, 8.
69. Ottley, New World A-Coming, 287.
it served as a “safety valve” and “moderating force” on a grass roots that was growing more restive. African Americans demanded that the realities of the American national life live up to national ideals, and Black newspapers reflected their desires.

In 1943, Ottley published his first book, *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America*, and its success earned him national recognition. He had struggled to find a publisher who believed the text would be marketable to the white readers necessary to ensure the book would succeed. Finally, with the help of his wife, he secured a contract with Houghton Mifflin. But even then, the book might have gone largely unnoticed were it not for the impeccable timing of its publication. Ottley’s text was prereleased to the media for review on August 1, 1943, the same day the Harlem riot exploded into the national headlines. Racial tensions built steadily throughout the war. In 1943, forty-seven cities reported “racial incidents.” Los Angeles, Detroit, Mobile, and Beaumont, Texas, had full-blown race riots. In Harlem, rumors that a white policeman had gunned down a black soldier touched off a spasm of violence as hundreds rampaged through the streets burning and looting. Suddenly, here was Roi Ottley poised to explain Black America to uncomprehending whites. During its first print run, *New World A-Coming* sold 50,000 copies and garnered generally positive critical reviews. Ottley was given Houghton Mifflin’s Life in America Prize, and he won the Ainsworth Award in 1944. Many of the book’s vignettes were adapted for the radio, and in 1945 those adaptations earned Ottley a coveted Peabody Award. To cap this impressive string of successes, he received a $2,500 grant from the prestigious Rosenwald Foundation. That money provided the financial cushion necessary for him to embark on his extended wartime tour of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

*New World A-Coming* is a maddeningly uneven work. Two-thirds of the text was drawn from previously published *Amsterdam News* columns, the WPA materials that he had absconded with, and reminiscences about his Harlem experiences. This approach would prove to be Ottley’s template. He often recycled older work. And though his subtitle claimed to offer a glimpse “Inside Black America,” *New World A-Coming* was actually firmly rooted in its Harlem milieu. Some African American reviewers noted Ottley’s use of anecdote in place of deep analysis and his penchant for dwelling on some of the seamier or more exotic elements of Black life, presumably to titillate white readers. They also argued that Ottley’s claim that his book

was “a study in black nationalism (and indeed black chauvinism)” was overblown and his use of the phrase black nationalism imprecise.74

However, the sections of the book that dealt with more contemporary personages and events—such as Roosevelt’s “Black cabinet,” the Black press, the threatened march on Washington and “Double V” campaign, and the impact of World War II on the African American community—demonstrated keen insight. Ottley knew all the key players. His writing may not have been particularly artful, but his relaxed and fluid style connected well with a general readership. Again, the timing of publication was immensely important and not just because of the racial unrest sweeping the country. Almost exactly one year later, the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal published his magisterial American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. Myrdal’s study offered the depth of research and analysis that New World A-Coming lacked, and with its publication, Ottley’s book slowly receded from public view. Many of the human interest–oriented vignettes found their way to the radio, but Ottley’s more perceptive writing was more often than not forgotten.

That did not, of course, keep the journalist from capitalizing on his newfound fame and fortune. After he lost his job at the Federal Writers’ Project, Ottley freelanced for a couple of years and then in 1943 was able to parlay his long-standing connections to the labor movement into a position as publicity director of the CIO’s National War Relief Committee, a group that raised over $20 million for relief efforts around the globe. With the success of New World A-Coming and the financial independence that brought, Ottley began to broaden his horizons. He convinced the editors at the labor newspaper PM and its sister publication Liberty Magazine to take him on as a war correspondent. He also wrote for the Pittsburgh Courier and the Overseas News Service. In 1944, he was commissioned as a captain in the U.S. Army and set off on a two-year, 60,000-mile journey through Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Much of Ottley’s writing from this period comprises the body of this volume.75

Ottley’s employment with PM and Liberty is especially notable. PM was founded in 1940 by Ralph Ingersoll, who made his reputation when he helped turn around the New Yorker and then salvaged Henry Luce’s
struggling ventures *Fortune* and *Life*. Ingersoll was far more liberal in his politics than Luce, with whom he ideologically butted heads. He loathed Luce’s continual assaults on FDR and the New Deal, his strident criticisms of the CIO and labor movement, and above all his support of Francisco Franco and the fascists in Spain. Ingersoll envisioned a new kind of newspaper that embraced the aesthetic innovations of magazines such as *Life* but that also embodied his liberal-Left politics. *PM* was a product of the politics of the Popular Front. It reflected Ingersoll’s political commitments to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, the labor movement, and anti-fascism. He reached out to a stable of like-minded reporters that included the Pulitzer Prize winner George Lyon, Penn Kimball, James Wechsler, and I. F. Stone. Ingersoll also decided that in order to guarantee the editorial independence of the new venture as well as signal that this was a new kind of paper, *PM* would eschew any form of advertising. It was a fateful decision. *PM* proved to be an innovative journalistic experiment but a financial debacle.76

It was extremely rare for an African American journalist to write for a white publication in that period. It is a testament to Ottley’s celebrity and political connections, as well as *PM’s* antiracist editorial position, that he was hired for such a high-profile job. The novelty of his position might also help us comprehend the unique reporting he did during his time as a war correspondent. Given the often extreme conditions facing African American soldiers in the Jim Crow military, the Black press had to play an advocacy role as well as simply report the war. The relegation of African American troops to menial labor, their stereotyping by way of “intelligence testing,” and the terrible violence inflicted on Black troops as they trained at bases in the South politicized the war coverage of African American correspondents.77 When they deployed to all corners of the globe, they continued to focus on inequality and ill treatment, and their reports often ran afoul of military censors. Black correspondents were forbidden to take battlefield photographs, especially when they depicted the second-class status of Black troops. Ottley’s close friend Ed Toles was chastised by army censors when he filed a report stating that Black nurses were only allowed to


77. For an excellent study of Black war correspondents in World War II, see John D. Stevens, “From the Back of the Foxhole: Black Correspondents in World War II,” *Journalism Monographs*, no. 27 (February 1973). Stevens compiled information on twenty-seven correspondents deployed for Black newspapers and interviewed many of them. Unfortunately, he did not include Ottley in his study because he had worked as a “special writer” for a white publication. Regardless, this work is an impressive bit of research.
tend German prisoners. Stories about simmering tensions and occasional violence between white and Black troops were especially embarrassing to the military establishment. Throughout the war, African American war correspondents were dogged in their advocacy of the men and women they covered, and they often found themselves on the front lines of some of the most vicious fighting.

Ottley had quite close relationships with some of his African American peers, including Ollie Stewart of the Baltimore Afro-American, Ollie Harrington and Randy Dixon of the Pittsburgh Courier, and Toles of the Chicago Defender. He traveled with them and occasionally shared housing. However, he often refused to bend to the racial mores of the segregated military, and he used his affiliation with PM to break free of the restrictions that race thrust upon him. He did spend time with the troops at the front and of course filed his share of human interest stories about Black GIs. More often, though, Ottley broke away from the pool of African American correspondents and followed his own muse. He had a particular interest in understanding American race relations in a global context. He saw that the war was obliterating the old colonial order, and he was dogged in tracking down interviews with public officials across Europe who could speak with authority about colonial peoples. Ottley also connected to the network of young African intellectuals who would lead the fight for decolonization in their home countries. For nearly four years, he was witness to the revolutionary changes that swept across the international community.

The first selection in this collection of Roi Ottley’s World War II writing is an unpublished manuscript entitled “Notes, Observations and Memoranda Concerning Travels in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, England, France, Belgium, Italy, and North Africa.” Although the document claims to cover the period “June to December 1944,” the last entry is dated November 3, 1944. This was Ottley’s workbook for the first swing of his international tour. It contains diary entries, copies of correspondence, and drafts of articles—some of which were censored by military authorities. There are descriptions of fellow journalists and encounters with celebrities such as Ernest Hemingway, Edward R. Murrow, and Joe Louis. More important, this text introduced themes that preoccupied the journalist for years. He commented frequently on conflicts between white and Black troops, on the efforts by white southern officers to transplant Jim Crow to European soil, and on the similarities between fascism and southern racism.

Ottley expressed resentment whenever he felt he was being pigeonholed

78. Ibid., 9–17.
as just an African American journalist. When asked by the captain of the
troop transport carrying him to England if he would offer a lecture on the
“Negro problem” in America, Ottley declined. And while traveling, he was
adamant about breaking away from the journalistic pack. Partly, his desire
to travel alone was driven by competition. “Too many Negro newspaper-
men in one spot,” he argued, “clutters up the outlets for stories.” However,
it also gave him the opportunity to observe race relations in a variety of Eu-
ropean locales as well as to focus on the treatment of colonial peoples. Roi
Ottley enjoyed the freedom of movement and general lack of discrimina-
tion that he experienced in Europe, but he also recognized that for all of the
political correctness of his European hosts and their criticisms of American
racism, they had their own colonial systems of racial and ethnic domina-
tion. His own burgeoning internationalism meshed well with PM’s editori-
"al position. The best of his PM journalism appears in this document.

It is unclear whether the African American press would have been as
interested in the nuances of European colonial policy while covering an
ongoing war: at that point, correspondents were far more intent on writing
about the contributions and travails of Black GIs. Yet in the immediate af-
termath of the war, as Europe struggled to stabilize and begin the long and
painful process of reconstruction, there was a pronounced upswing in the
number of stories about the fluid international situation. The old colonial
empires crumbled, and the chartering of the new United Nations seemed a
hopeful signal for the future. Ottley had traveled for most of 1944 and 1945
for PM. Toward the end of 1945, he began submitting articles as the foreign
correspondent for the Pittsburgh Courier. He continued to travel abroad off
and on through 1947 and into 1948.

After the war, there was a significant shift in the tone and substance
of Ottley’s writing. From the unpublished materials, it is clear that he
planned on writing about his World War II experiences. Given the inter-
"nal evidence, the envisioned monograph would have mirrored New World
A-Coming in style and structure. Ottley was constantly comparing race re-
lations at home and abroad. He built an impressive network of contacts
among government officials as well as individuals involved in anticolonial
politics. Though he was always one to cast a skeptical eye on the politics of
the day, there was also a sense of hopefulness in his diary scribblings and
his articles. He knew that Europe’s former colonies would be independent
nations, and the prospect, especially as it might impact race relations in
the United States, thrilled him. Regardless, his book on his war experiences
did not appear immediately. Instead, in 1948 he published his history text,
Black Odyssey, which received generally positive reviews and sold modestly.
Meanwhile, he was going through a period of instability in his personal life, including his divorce from Gladys Tarr, and except for an occasional freelance piece, he did not catch on with any of his hometown newspapers. In 1950, deciding that greener pastures lay to the west, he relocated to Chicago.

There, Ottley made a fresh start. He became a frequent contributor to the Chicago Defender, and in 1953, he achieved another journalistic coup when he was invited to write a weekly human interest column for the Chicago Tribune. Once again, he was one of the few African American journalists in the country writing for a predominantly white newspaper. But it was in the offices of the Defender that Ottley met the woman who would become his third wife, Alice Dungey. Dungey was working as the newspaper’s archivist and librarian. She would provide Ottley with the love, encouragement, and stability that had been impossible for him to attain with his peripatetic lifestyle. They married in February 1951 and were together until his death from a heart attack in 1960.

It was Dungey who pushed Ottley to return to his comparative study of American and European race relations. The result was the publication of No Green Pastures at the end of 1951. This was by far his most controversial work. Gone from his analysis was the idealism of the Popular Front. He force-marched through the text from England to France, Italy, Germany, the Balkans, Greece, Egypt, and Israel, and with each chapter, he railed at what he considered the hypocrisy of those nations. At a moment when many African American artists and intellectuals sought solace in Europe away from the noxious racism and politics of the United States, Ottley issued a stinging indictment of what he argued was only the facade of freedom. The positive treatment that many African Americans received, he claimed, masked far more negative realities for indigenous people of color, who were discriminated against in jobs and education. In fact, the possibilities for material gain fueled his increasingly positive assessment of American race relations. Yes, racial violence and segregation continued to mar the democratic experiment, but the rising living standards for Blacks made the United States superior to Europe. For Ottley, standard of living and quality of life were one and the same thing.79

Although some white reviewers were quite pleased with Ottley’s conclusions, many of his peers were not. Marvel Cooke, for instance, a colleague at the Amsterdam News who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him on the picket line during the Newspaper Guild strike, was enraged by

the book, which she called an “empty mockery and a slap in the face to the
countless thousands of black and white men and women who battle con-
cscientiously for freedom for black men in America.” According to Cooke,
Ottley’s depictions of “Negroes in other countries . . . [were] stereotypes.
They have ugly cuts across their cheeks, they are illiterate and frayed, they
live, for the most part, on the edge of culture.” Just in case the reader was
unclear about where she stood on the book, Cooke’s review appeared with
a photograph of its author bearing the caption “Roi Ottley: Prisoner of
White Supremacy.”

A more nuanced, but no less eviscerating, engagement with the book
was offered by James Baldwin. Baldwin began by noting that Ottley’s jour-
nalistic style was not appropriate for taking on a subject of such complex-
ity: the piling up of anecdotes did not an argument make. His “journalistic
method” was “capable of description but rarely of penetration.” More sig-
nificant still, in his zeal to prove his thesis that “American Negroes are bet-
ter off than Negroes anywhere else in the world, and that Europe ought
to clean house before trumpeting our lynchings,” Ottley described a Black
America that was a sanitized cartoon version of itself. Baldwin assailed Ott-
ley for claiming “our heritage is great” while at the same time removing
“its more troubling aspects.” No Green Pastures denied “past humiliation and
present trouble” in order to reduce “black-white history to a kind of tab-
leau of material progress.” Baldwin mocked its author’s style of argument.
“It is not . . . enough to suggest that . . . ‘the bulk of blacks in Europe are
abysmally poor,’ American Negroes are better off because some are able to
drive a Cadillac. The history of the Negro in America is a heavier weight
than this celebrated vehicle is able to carry.”

There was one notable exception to the generally angry reaction of
Black reviewers. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP found Ottley’s text “interest-
ing reading with no forbidding profundity, moving along easily in the hands
of a competent reporter and storyteller.” He, too, noted that Ottley’s ar-
gument rang hollow in light of continued oppression in this country. At
the same time, though, he believed Ottley’s analysis was a vital corrective
at a moment when “Communists and their friends [exploited] America’s
treatment of its Negro minority.” It was important to remind the country’s
nominal friends in other parts of the world that these problems often tran-

16, 1951.
Wilkins recognized the political utility of Ottley’s book.

The wartime Popular Front coalition of Left political organizations, labor unions, and civil rights activists was demolished when Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were transformed into a full-blown anticommunist witch hunt. In response, so-called mainstream civil rights organizations such as the NAACP fell all over themselves to be the first to shear off any militant appendages. Meanwhile, one of the most dramatic examples of the witch hunt’s effect was the treatment accorded W. E. B. DuBois. Within just a few weeks of the publication of No Green Pastures, DuBois was indicted for allegedly serving as an “agent of a foreign principal” for his work with the Peace Information Center. This episode was just the latest phase in the Truman administration’s calculated effort to isolate and silence the more militant voices in the freedom movement. The eighty-two-year-old DuBois was threatened with five years in prison and a $100,000 fine. The case was eventually thrown out, but the federal harassment continued. DuBois was routinely hauled into court on spurious charges, and his passport was seized by the State Department. All the while, Walter White directed NAACP Legal Defense lawyers to stay away from the beleaguered dissident, claiming that the federal government had overwhelming evidence to convict DuBois. The organization that DuBois had helped to found forty years before not only sat on the sidelines during his time of need, it also helped spread the rumors that nearly destroyed him.

Roi Ottley certainly had nothing to do with DuBois’s troubles, but the rightward swing of his politics mirrored what was happening in liberal civil rights circles. Ottley was never a radical. As a young, aspiring journalist, he was swept up in the political tides of the 1930s. The internationalism of the war years provided the context for some of his best writing. But Ottley’s was a solidly middle-class sensibility that was born of his privileged upbringing. It was easy for him to turn his back on the political allies of

his youth. And like his politics, his writing also turned, becoming more mainstream and less controversial. Roi and Alice Ottley settled into a very comfortable life in Chicago. Although he never again achieved the national notice he’d enjoyed with New World A-Coming, he continued to be a prolific writer. He churned out columns for the Defender and the Tribune. He published occasional freelance pieces with Ebony and other periodicals. He also undertook a quite well received biography of Chicago Defender founder and editor Robert Abbott. And he tried his hand at writing fiction as well: his novel, The White Marble Lady, was published posthumously. Finally, he hosted a successful radio show on Chicago’s WGN that could be heard through much of the Midwest. In the context of the peak of his fame in the 1940s, Sepia’s 1960 query — “What became of Roi Ottley?” — might make a certain amount of sense. But by just about any other measure, the man lived a full and successful life.

Historians will continue to wrestle with the ways that we conceptualize the so-called long civil rights movement. Our sense of the periodization and our definitions of “movement politics” will become sharper, and the people and events of the civil rights struggles in the interwar years will come into brighter relief. Of course, no one life story can provide the perfect context for understanding an era. And it is certainly true that Roi Ottley has never appeared in the histories as anything more than an occasional footnote. Yet by piecing together his experiences in this critical period in American race relations and trying to understand the trajectory of his life and career against the backdrop of historical events, we have a unique means for engaging his writing. Likewise, the writing that comprises this volume offers a fascinating opportunity to think about the political awakening that took place in the 1930s and 1940s and the vital international impulse that drove it.