


TAKE THREE: THE BOMBING OF THE *USS PANAY*

A View from Beale Street

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“I’ve been watching with interest the reaction of the white folks of this section regarding the sinking of that U.S. gunboat, Panay,” Nat D. Williams told the readers of his syndicated column, a little over a week after Japanese aircraft sunk the American vessel on the Yangtze River near Nanking.¹ He was certainly not alone. The might of a small island country had been on the minds of many African Americans for quite some time.

Williams had been born and raised in a house on Memphis’s Beale Street by his mother, who was a local vaudeville dancer, and his grandmother, who instilled in him a love for learning. His upbringing taught him how to listen for ordinary working people’s innermost thoughts and ruminations, how to be sensitive toward idiosyncrasies in the quotidian, and good times and gloom in Black social life—a skill which earned him a regular column in Black newspapers called “Down on Beale.”²

By day, as a teacher at Booker T. Washington High School, Williams gave lectures on historical struggles of Black and Indigenous peoples to motivated students. By night, he was a master of ceremonies and an impresario at the Palace Theatre, where he hosted the popular “Amateur Night on Beale Street.” Such R&B artists as B. B. King, Bobby “Blue” Bland, Al Hibbler, Johnny Ace, Rufus Thomas, and Elvis Presley were all featured talents at one point in time. In postwar years, he would become a pioneering radio disc jockey at WDIA Radio.³

Although far from Beale Street, the Japanese attack on the Yangtze captured his imagination. By December 1937, world affairs had grown volatile. The outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent Japanese invasion of Shanghai and Nanking in the summer of 1937 had heightened geopolitical wrangling between the United States and Japan.⁴ Against this backdrop, Williams remarked that the Japanese were “cullud folks, despite their many white ways,” characterizing them as “the only ones of God’s chillum on the globe who really speak the white man’s language ... the bark of a cannon and the clink of a golden dollar.”⁵ His commentary was not a mere expression of admiration. Nor was he alluding to the coming of race war, although the attack on the *USS Panay* certainly threatened an all-out war between the two powers angling for power in Asia and the Pacific.

Japan had been the talk of the town among African Americans since Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905. This event, W. E. B. Du Bois interpreted, “marked an epoch.” It sent shock waves across the Darker World.⁶ “Since the rise of the Japanese, the Caucasians dare not look down upon other Asiatic peoples,” the Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat-Sen proclaimed. The Indian nationalist leader L. L. Rai, a close friend of Du Bois, agreed that Japan’s ascendancy

¹Nat D. Williams, “Down on Beale,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Dec. 22, 1937.

²William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia, 1999), 111; Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America’s Main Street* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1981), 5–6.

³Barlow, *Voice Over*, 108–33.

⁴Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York, 1997), 160–213.

⁵Williams, “Down on Beale,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Dec. 22, 1937.

⁶W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Color Line Belts the World,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line*, eds. Bill Mullen and Cathryn Watson (Jackson, MS, 2005), 34.

“vindicated the honor of Asia and proved to the world that, given equal opportunities, the Asiatics are inferior to none—in any sphere of life, military, or civil.” For Du Bois, this meant that “the awakening of the brown and black races” must “follow in time.”⁷

Just over a decade later, when Japanese officials demanded equality with white nations during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the leading activists of the New Negro renaissance, from Marcus Garvey to A. Philip Randolph, rallied behind the Japanese—and bristled when U.S. President Woodrow Wilson opposed their demands. The Caribbean radical intellectual Hubert Harrison was quick to point out the imperial farce during the “Disarmament Conference” in 1921–1922. Far from promoting peace and democracy, he argued, Wilsonian internationalism ushered in a new world order founded upon renewed determination to enable colonial rule, double down on racism, and scale up the rapacious greed and labor exploitation of multinational corporations.⁸

In *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, published in 1920, Du Bois referred to this imperial convolution as “the anarchy of empire.” During the First World War era, it reached well beyond the theaters of war abroad and took hold on the home front to become the crucible of racial violence. Whites carried out terror campaigns and extrajudicial killings in Black communities in cities and towns across the United States, such as East St. Louis in the summer of 1917, Chicago in the summer of 1919, Elaine in the autumn of 1919, and Tulsa in the spring of 1921.⁹

Writing for the *Negro World* in November 1921, Harrison contextualized this racial condition and its global–local nexus: “Since some of the darker peoples have arms, it is obvious that the white powers must first disarm them before they themselves can disarm. Of these darker nations Japan is the most powerful. She alone has ‘entered into rivalry with the European powers in Asia.’ Therefore their main concern is Japan at the second Peace Congress.” But, he quickly amended, “Japan is only an index.” He continued: “Hundreds of millions in Asia and Africa are restive under white control. If Japan should take up arms against any white nation at this time it would be ‘all Hell let loose’—and they know it.”¹⁰ Japan’s might confounded the white imperial plan, and it became a metonym for the growing militancy of the Darker World.

In working-class Black enclaves and on streets like Beale, admiration for the Japanese persisted throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The presence of a strong “colored” Japan posed the problem of racial hierarchy and colonial rule squarely, elevating to the level of world politics the everyday reality to which darker people were all too familiar. In their eyes, they were watching something of a spectacle—an ascendant Japan becoming an affront to the international system forged out of plunder, violence, and dispossession.¹¹

The appeal of Japan among African Americans was closely connected to what Ernest Allen, Jr. calls “the flowering of Black messianic nationalism.” It was highly contingent; it coincided

⁷Du Bois, “The Color Line Belts the World,” 34; Nathaniel Deutsch, “‘The Asiatic Black Man’: An African American Orientalism?” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (Oct. 2001): 194–5; Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia, 2008), 67–78; Gerald Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun: African Americans, Japan, and the Rise of Afro-Asian Solidarity* (New York, 2018), 25–40.

⁸Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918* (New York, 2009); Yuichiro Onishi, “The New Negro of the Pacific: How African Americans Forged Solidarity with Japan,” in *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance*, eds. Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani (Minneapolis, 2013), 127–9.

⁹Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 12–4, 171–212; Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 27–8, 246.

¹⁰Hubert Harrison, “The Washington Conference,” *Negro World* 11 (Nov. 19, 1921), in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT, 2001), 230–1.

¹¹Ernest Allen, Jr., “When Japan Was ‘Champion of the Darker Races’: Satokata Takahashi and the Flowering of Black Messianic Nationalism,” *The Black Scholar* 24, no. 1 (1994): 23–46; Ernest Allen, Jr., “Waiting for Tojo: The Pro-Japan Vigil of Black Missourians, 1932–1943,” *Gateway Heritage* (1995): 38–55; Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun*.

with the coronation of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in 1930. Viewed by some as akin to the coming of the Messiah, Selassie's rise inspired groups from the Rastafari movement in Jamaica to a host of pro-Japan organizations, including the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World (led by General Lee Butler and Policarpio Manansala), the Ethiopian Pacific Movement (led by Robert Jordan), the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (led by Mittie Maude Lena Gordon), and The Development of Our Own (led by Satokata Takahata and his African American wife Pearl Sherrod). In fact, when Italian forces invaded Ethiopia in 1935, the grassroots responses were potent; hundreds of thousands, for instance, took to the streets in Harlem.¹²

The Ethiopian Crisis animated Black internationalism in the United States by way of tapping into the longstanding tradition of Black vindicationism. Not surprisingly, the Federal Bureau of Investigation kept its watchful eye, targeting a wide range of Black nationalist and religious organizations, including the Allah Temple of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple. Soon after the outbreak of the Pacific War, Elijah Muhammad, the future leader of the Nation of Islam, who fashioned and propagated a new identity for Afrodiasporic people as the "Asiatic Black Man," would be arrested for sedition, along with other leaders of pro-Japan Black organizations based in Chicago and the St. Louis and East St. Louis regions.¹³

The very idea of Japan as a defiant "colored" nation contesting global white supremacy created "Afro-Asian traffic" during the interwar period.¹⁴ Some were enthralled, while others sought to push back pro-Japan sentiments, as leading Black communists did. They tried to quell working-class African Americans' sympathy toward Japan by publishing and circulating the pamphlet titled *Is Japan the Champion of Colored Races?* in August 1938.¹⁵ Meanwhile, creative thinkers like Williams navigated the workings of race with certain dexterity to manifest the ethos of Black masses, as Harrison once did.

Williams had never been a fan of messianic religiosity. "Any time the majority of us hear that dictum about Ethiopia's 'stretching forth her hand', and so forth, we get a mental picture of the hand's holding a thick bludgeon," he quipped.¹⁶ Japanese emperor worship, too, struck him as idolatry: "Whatever the emperor says is something like the voice of God.... The god can do no wrong, make no mistakes. It wouldn't even be a mistake for a god to bomb a United States gunboat, or wouldn't [*sic*] it? Well, that's what I am waiting to see, whether the Japanese emperor-god is going to apologize."¹⁷

Down on Beale Street, Williams understood salvation differently. He rebuked the worship of a deity to validate one's worth. Instead, he regarded that salvation started with devotion to oneself, to see oneself as equal to any. Was Williams rooting for Japan? From the standpoint of Black self-determination, he reworked, in his prose, an explosive event like the Japanese bombing of the *USS Panay* to deliver a satire. "Our gods would not admit inferiority," he explained, "regardless of the shortcomings of their worshippers even when they blow up imperial

¹²Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2018); Keisha N. Blain, "[F]or the Rights of Darker People in Every Part of the World": Pearl Sherrod, Black Internationalist Feminism, and Afro-Asian Politics during the 1930s," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 17, nos. 1–2 (2015): 90–112; Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun*, 57–93; Robert A. Hill, "Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafari Religions," *The Beat* 3, no. 4 (Aug. 1984): 19. On the distinct Black religious experience, see Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York, 2016).

¹³Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun*, 94–111; Allen, "When Japan Was 'Champion of the Darker Races'"; Allen, "Waiting for Tojo."

¹⁴Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, "Guest Editors' Introduction," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 7.

¹⁵Theodore Bassett, A. W. Berry, Cyril Briggs, James W. Ford, and Harry Haywood, *Is Japan the Champion of the Colored Races?* (New York, 1938), https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2010.55.9 (accessed Dec. 9, 2019).

¹⁶Williams, "Down on Beale," *Atlanta Daily World*, Aug. 29, 1936.

¹⁷Williams, "Down on Beale," *Atlanta Daily World*, Dec. 22, 1937.

gunboats.”¹⁸ His commentary on race and world affairs, combined with meditation on idolatry, could go in multiple directions. It was double-edged. Here, too, as it was for Harrison, Japan served as an index to track the character of historical Black struggles.

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¹⁸Ibid.