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Book Review of The Origins of African-American Interests in International Law & Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955

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Internationalizing the African American Struggle – or Not

The Origins of African-American Interests in International Law. By Henry J. Richardson III. (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008. 501 pp. hardcover, \$65.00).

Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955. By Carol Anderson. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 302 pp. hardcover, \$89.00; softcover, \$29.99).

Year after year I, and many others like me, struggle to educate the poorly misguided folks who are indoctrinated with the idea that black slaves were happy, or otherwise comfortable in captivity, or that black slaves did not possess the will or ability to effectively revolt against the system of chattel slavery. We hear these claims from students mostly, but on occasion, and much to our dismay, we hear it from other scholars and faculty. Although a plethora of research is available to discount such asinine claims, a complete historical understanding of how blacks tried to fight back using legal means, especially during the early years of American and International slavery, was missing in race and ethnic scholarship.

Enter Henry J. Richardson's book, *The Origins of African-American Interests in International Law*. This massive tome of five hundred plus pages (sixteen chapters in all) is a tour de force on black resistance to being enslaved and the active role of blacks who turned to international law to rid themselves of slavery and the ill effects of racism. Richardson's central motivation behind this book is to outline blacks' claims and exploration of outside law as both a confirmation and instrument from which to demand their freedom.

Chapter One begins by addressing European slave trade, first from Africa to Europe and later throughout the Western Hemisphere. The brilliance of this chapter lies in Richardson's ability to effectively capture the complexities of early African resistance to slavery. Contrary to scholars who argue that Africans are, in part, responsible for their roles in providing slaves to Europeans, Richardson notes that it is ridiculous to equate the misguided position of a few Africans slave traders to that of the over twenty million Africans who were taken by Europeans with malicious oppressive intent and conscious awareness of that intent. Most notably, Richardson documents that the first slave revolts in North America occurred much

earlier than 1619, the year marking the arrival of twenty slaves to Jamestown, VA (Chapters Two and Three explore the story of these slaves and their implicit claims to “outside” law). This is important because it suggests that the question of the moral legitimacy of slavery was contested at least seventy years prior to 1619.

Richardson continues his probe of black claims to international or “outside” law (the author notes that “international law” is a newer-used term), first examining slaves’ lives in pre-Revolutionary Dutch and British New York, followed by early American Revolution, the Constitutional Convention and drafting of the U.S. Constitution, the French-American Treaty and Louisiana Purchase and the War of 1812. There are too many notable bits of information throughout the book than there are pages of review. However, Chapter Six provides one of the best overviews of African claims to the international community to be free of slavery, to include strategies employed by maroon communities – settlements of escaped slaves in remote locations throughout the Caribbean and Central, South, and North America.

The limitations of this book are few – the book is densely written and after plowing through the many pages, I longed for a chapter that tied the relevance of this research to present day issues of race and racism. That said, this book is a must read for students interested in Africana studies, international law, political sociology, Critical Race Theory, or race and ethnic relations, in general. Hopefully, Richardson is working on his next installment beginning with the early 1800s. I will be the first in line to pick it up.

Shifting forward in time and focusing on a single legal structure, Anderson’s *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* studies black activism and the emerging United Nations. While many folks are still celebrating the election of America’s first black president, by all means one of the most pivotal moments in US history, inequalities in the black communities continue to be ignored or downplayed. Indeed, although the economic recession has deeply affected many Americans, it has been devastating for African Americans. For example, according to the Pew Foundation, blacks and Latino/as were disproportionately associated with subprime loans compared to their white counterparts; by 2008 black home ownership was at 47.5 percent, 1.9 percent lower than what it was in 2004. Further, this blatant disregard for one of our most basic human rights does not end with housing issues. There is ample evidence that 40 plus years after the Civil Rights Act, blacks

continue to be plagued by inadequate health care and education, limited employment opportunities and economic resources, and a political system in which blacks and other minorities continue to be largely unrepresented.

How did we, as a society, get to this point? Moreover, how can we explain why our schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and even our lives are still segregated given the many organizations and people who have paved the way for social and racial equality? One answer can be found in Carol Anderson's book, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955*. This is an ingenious, historically complex, and critically-researched book on the struggle for human rights – and civil rights – in the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement.

In the first chapters of the book, Anderson outlines the complexities and multitude of obstacles that blacks faced in their pursuit of equality. Beyond the social discourse that maintained whites were superior to blacks, the racial rift between organizations such as the Communist party and the NAACP, and the unwillingness of both the right wing and so-called “friends of the negro” to seriously consider the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights, were the internal conflicts within the NAACP. Although it was clear to most of the leaders of the NAACP that the best approach to obtaining its civil rights mission was through expanding its vision to include universal human rights, there were disagreements about how best to pursue this course of action.

Anderson argues that although the NAACP was able to eventually savor the taste of success with landmark cases such as the overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the dismantling of Jim Crow de jure segregation, it was a short term fix that ultimately did more damage than good in terms of securing equal rights for blacks in the US. Just as the US refused to ratify the UN covenant on human rights, it virtually ignored criticism that more needed to be done to ameliorate over three centuries of slavery and racial apartheid. By maintaining its stance that conflicts within the US should remain internal rather than be subjected to external scrutiny, the US was effectively able to curtail any real investigation by the UN into the atrocious conditions of its black population.

What is strikingly light in the analysis, although alluded to throughout the book, is the pervasiveness of whiteness. The use of the Holocaust to effect moral shock might have been a useful tactic by the UN and other organizations, but although Jews were otherized, they were not black. Further, as Anderson eloquently noted, “friends of the negro” like Eleanor

Roosevelt prioritized whiteness and white supremacy over equality for blacks and though they were not nearly as overtly vicious as the southern Democrats in their detest of blacks, the subtle tactics they used to ensure the struggle of civil rights did not become an issue of human rights did far worse damage.

Regardless, Anderson has produced a book that deserves to be widely read. Consider the apology for slavery that recently passed the US House and Senate, but with the disclaimer that reparations are a mute issue. How does this differ from previous failed attempts by the US to recognize and address the cumulative effects of racism? How does this continue to affect the lives of countless blacks, especially those lived during Jim Crow and are still around to tell their tales? The implications of this research are far-reaching and give us new perspective in not only understanding how racial inequalities continue to persist in the 21st century, but also offers a possible solution through universal human rights.

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