

Brian Russell Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors: Literary and International Representation of the New Negro* (University of Virginia Press, 2013), 240 pp.

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In 1912 James Weldon Johnson published *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. At the time, Johnson was stationed as a U.S. consul in Corinto, Nicaragua, where he “surveilled the activities of Nicaraguan gunboats, wrote reports for the State Department on these activities, and used a secret code to convey the intelligence” (43). Once the Nicaraguan government was overthrown by a US-supported revolution, Johnson evaluated “counterrevolutionary sentiment among Nicaraguans,” thereby helping to pave the way for the emergence of a pro-US leader. No doubt concerned about compromising his consulship and his future affiliation with the US government, Johnson chose to publish the first edition of his autobiography anonymously. (Readers familiar with the book will recall that it offers a searing account of the hypocrisies of the US color line.) Although the novel’s original anonymity has been well noted, its connection to Johnson’s own diplomatic work—both its opportunities and its constraints—has received scant attention.

The gambit of Brian Russell Roberts’s *Artistic Ambassadors: Literary and International Representation of the New Negro* is that the novel’s anonymous publication should be seen as its most vital aspect because it directly locates the novel within a dialectic of belonging and estrangement, entitlement and disenfranchisement. And *Autobiography* is far from alone in this strategy. Roberts places Johnson’s text alongside the contributions of dozens of other writers and political figures, many of whom sought to validate the “strategic indirection” by African Americans who were in one way or another both invested in the nation-state and denied civil rights within the US. This model of strategic indirection takes its shape from what Roberts identifies as an early African-American ambassadorial method of diplomacy: a kind of oblique advancement, wherein the progress of the few argued for more general access to civil liberties for all African Americans. These New Negro diplomats “sought to become representative Americans and thus to erase the color line in the United States,” while, by doing so, they also became complicit with a State Department “that maintained a segregated Negro circuit” and endorsed Jim Crow rule at home (40).

What makes Roberts’s book so compelling in the context of studies of black transnationalism is his focus on figures like Johnson, who were caught in the

intricate nexus of acquiescence to the state and, at times, principled opposition to it. As Roberts put it “the ethics and efficacy of this approach to racial progress have never been uncontroversial,” an international version of what Ralph Ellison identifies as “overcoming ‘em with yeses,” living “with your head in the lion’s mouth” (16). He goes over well-known figures, such as W.E.B. Du Bois (and his one-month stint as envoy to Liberia under Calvin Coolidge), Johnson, Frederick Douglass, Ida Gibbs Hunt, Angelina Grimké, Richard Wright, as well as lesser-known political figures—all of whom worked as US representatives abroad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Together, he argues, under the auspices of the US imperial project, this group of black intelligentsia shaped New Negro discourse on race, aesthetics, and the possibilities as well as limits of international allegiances.

In this way, Roberts takes a fresh stab at the seemingly ineluctable impasse within studies of black transnationalism, that is, the relationship between solidarity abroad and enfranchisement at home. As Roberts points out, much of this scholarship has focused on the Cold War era. Roberts shifts the conversation back to earlier decades, and to their lessons regarding the instrumentality of international connections to challenging and changing racist US policies. Relatedly, figures who openly opposed the nation-state are at the forefront of many of these investigations, rather than those who willingly served as representatives of it. The somewhat anomalous position of these diplomats makes them prime sources for scrutinizing how far the bonds—and the breaks—of the international may take us.

For example, when Paul Robeson declared in 1934 that it was in the Soviet Union that he “walked in human dignity for the first time,” he was not operating under the aegis of the State Department. He was articulating a more common sentiment that historically it is only in the context of international spaces that African Americans have felt fully themselves and, ironically, fully American. In an anecdote about losing his passport and being mistaken for an African, James Baldwin similarly comments on his life in France. And holed up outside Beijing in the 1960s, Mabel and Richard Williams at once became celebrities for the cause of Maoist communism and remained critically out of touch with the violence of China’s cultural revolution. Whatever the particularities, the status of “American” has given Americans—black and white—a certain privileged purchase in zones outside the US. Would it be so insane to imagine that this purchase, once experienced, could translate to life back home? This was the expectation of many soldiers returning from World War I (witness Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die”). Perceived equality for a few abroad did not,

sadly, mean equality at home for everyone. For individual tactical alliances with foreign governments, as in the case of Robeson, Baldwin, McKay, and the Williamses, do not vouchsafe a means or an end to global white supremacy or to authoritarian rule.

Nevertheless, there are strong arguments for seeing in black transnationalism structural opposition to the systems of oppression both within the foreign space and the nation-state. Linking black politics in the US to various international vantage points, what emerges from Roberts's study is the importance of performance and media to the iterations of these connections. Indeed, tracking various media alongside structures of governance, their overlaps and discontinuities, could offer a way of looking at the material infrastructure of black transnationalism. Other than its monolingual approach to black internationalism, one of the limitations of *Artistic Ambassadors* may be that, in structuring his work around Johnson's autobiography about racial passing, it gravitates toward political questions of identity and recognition. To be sure, these questions have brought us many insights and moved the dialogue about racial inequalities forward, yet they may not be the best avenues for contemplating black transnationalism. At its best moments Roberts's book may suggest a growing trend towards investigating the contingent, even necessary failure of black internationalism, confined to either "strategic indirection" or more direct approaches. As a point of entry, black internationalism does not offer a clear-cut route out of domestic domination and oppression, nor does it unfold along the identical terms of oppression within a nation-state. This becomes imminently clear when we look at the cases of figures like Robeson, Baldwin, Wright, and the Williamses, all of whom merited elaborate FBI surveillance files, and each of whom chose a different route for negotiating the pressures of allegiance and resistance. Their choices return us to the pressing question: how can we best address the structural links between planetary neocolonialism and racial oppressions within the nation-state? Reflecting upon the rich histories of those who shuttled between these poles of negotiation may be our best hope of articulating provisional solutions and avoiding the pitfalls of the past.