

“Empire and Diasporization: A View from Tuskegee”<sup>1</sup>

Frank Andre Guridy  
Assistant Professor of History  
University of Texas at Austin

On April 8, 1903, John Charles Ramos, of Ponce, Puerto Rico, sat down to write a letter to Booker T. Washington, the famous African-American leader and Principal of the Tuskegee Institute. In less than fluent English, Ramos described himself as “a colored young man” who wanted his “race to be very right, social[ly], financial[ly], and very high in intelligenc[e] also.” Ramos wrote Washington to propose the idea of founding a “great negro [men’s] association” that would connect African descended peoples across the globe. “We will send our delegates everywhere and [we] will have the widest association ever known,” he insisted to Washington. “In America we have several million colored people, [and] in Africa also” Ramos wrote, while in Puerto Rico there “several men [of the colored race] that are true and real eminent fel[l]ows.” Ramos felt that the time was right for such an association due to Puerto Rico’s recent and partial incorporation into the United States after the War of 1898. “Porto-Rico has become a part of the United States so that [if] the people of Porto-Rico [are] a part of the people of the U.S.” Ramos reasoned, “then the colored people of Porto-Rico [are] [also] a part of the colored people of the U.S.A.” While Ramos boldly presented his ambitious plan to Washington, he let the Tuskegee Principal know that he did not “pretend to be a leader.” That [title] “belongs to you and other gentlemen that are luminaries and know more than I. I know that I cannot be captain but [I can be a] soldier.”

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Ramos's letter to Washington highlights the importance of Booker T. Washington and his school—the Tuskegee Institute—in the formation of Afro-diasporic linkages at the turn of the twentieth century. His proposal for a “great negro [men's] association” illustrates the ways people of African descent looked to Washington as a leader of African descendants throughout the globe. Moreover, the Afro-Puerto Rican's race-based project complicates our understanding of racial formation in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. As my paper will show, African-descendants from Cuba and Puerto Rico—populations not typically studied as Afro-diasporic subjects—were central figures in Tuskegee's emergence as a diasporic institution. Finally, Ramos viewed Puerto Rico's incorporation into the U.S. empire not as an act of imperialist aggression against the Puerto Rican nation, but instead as an opportunity to create transnational linkages between African descended populations in both countries. Ramos's letter is one of thousands that demonstrate the ways Tuskegee became an epicenter of Afro-diasporic interaction in this period. While Washington continually portrayed himself to white U.S. Americans as a non-threatening “Negro” loyal to the South, his school became a key site of cosmopolitan Afro-diasporic activity in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing from research conducted in the Booker T. Washington Papers in the Library of Congress and the Tuskegee University Archives, this paper highlights the ways Tuskegee became a place where largely disconnected Afro-diasporic populations came together at the turn of the twentieth century. My understanding of the concept of the

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, James D. Anderson, *The Education of the Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Donald Spivey, *Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978); Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). A recent reconsideration of Washington and his legacy is W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up from Slavery 100 Years Later* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

African Diaspora goes beyond the traditional emphasis on the dispersal of people of African descent from Africa as a result of the slave trade. Instead, I focus on the ongoing social and cultural interactions among them across various boundaries after emancipation that were based on their perception of a common experience. If historians have documented the various ways the nation has been imagined by historical actors, they have yet to fully document the ways transnational modes of belonging are created and maintained. Such an investigation need not discount the power of national allegiances. However, the intertwined processes of imperialism and Jim Crow segregation compelled people of African descent to develop survival strategies that extended beyond the boundaries of the nation. These relationships were motivated by material incentives as much as they were by a psychic desire for belonging. Afro-diasporic linkages presented concrete benefits, including opportunities for an education, political solidarity, artistic inspiration, and potential profits. While these relationships were forged within the context of U.S. empire-building, they were not simply the product of U.S. imperialist designs. Instead, they were created largely by the agency of black people themselves. Rather than waging a counteroffensive to imperialism, many Afro-Diasporic subjects in the Caribbean and the U.S. sought to take advantage of the opportunities created by the emerging imperial structure. These initiatives illustrate the complex interplay between diasporization, or the process by which diasporas are made, and empire-building in this period.

A study of the rich and varied cross-national relationships created by African-descended groups in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States contributes to an understanding of the formation of diasporic communities in world history. While some

scholars have sought to identify typologies of diasporas starting with the Jewish model, this paper instead takes up the task of documenting diaspora in action, or the ways Afro-diasporic linkages were made in practice.<sup>3</sup> The foundational work of historians and anthropologists on African cultural continuities and transculturation during the era of slavery has enriched our understanding of African diasporic cultures in the Americas. However, the task of historicizing the actual making of diasporas after emancipation and independence has yet to be accomplished. The cross-national relationships analyzed in this study reveals that diasporization among African descendants was a process that continued long after the end of slavery in the Americas.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the notion of the African Diaspora that informs this book goes beyond the traditional focus on the dispersal of people of African descent from Africa as a result of the slave trade. It draws upon James Clifford's notion of "routes" which emphasizes that the "transnational connections linking diasporas need not be articulated primarily through a real or symbolic homeland...Decentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return." Moreover, this book concurs with Clifford's argument that a "shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin."<sup>5</sup> African-descended elites in the U.S.

Cuba, and Puerto Rico reached across national borders and cultural differences because

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001); and Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora* 10 (2001): 189-219.

<sup>4</sup> Along with the voluminous scholarship on slavery, the scholarship on Cuba's relationship to the African Diaspora is dominated by studies of Afro-Cuban religions inspired by the anthropological and folkloric studies of Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera. See for example, Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afrocubana: Los negros brujos* (Madrid: Librería de F. Fé, 1906); Lydia Cabrera, *La sociedad secreta Abakuá* (Miami: Ediciones C. R. 1970); George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Cell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Tomás Fernández Robaina, *Hablen paleros y santeros* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 249-50. The notion of "routes" informed Paul Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

they saw themselves experiencing common forms of racism. These varied relationships contributed to the larger reconstitution of the African Diaspora in the post-emancipation period. If the African Diaspora was continually remade through the “live dialogue” between Africa and the Americas, it was also reconstituted by the continuing interactions among African descendents outside the continent.<sup>6</sup> An investigation of the ways Afro-Diasporic peoples forged relationships across national, colonial, cultural, and linguistic borders illustrates the ways diasporas are remade and transformed.<sup>7</sup> As a concept that illuminates the creation of cross-border communities, diaspora is a useful way to interpret cross-national African-descended interaction that is not reducible to politicized forms of “black internationalism” or “racial solidarity.”

Aspiring African-descended youth like Ramos sought out Washington because of his growing international reputation. In an era when racial segregation was becoming the governing principle of education in the U.S. South, Tuskegee, and its predecessor Hampton Institute, championed what became known as the “Hampton-Tuskegee Idea” of industrial education for people of African descent. Founded by ex-slave and Hampton graduate Booker T. Washington in rural Alabama in 1881, the institute grew rapidly and superseded Hampton as the most prominent and well-endowed school for African-Americans. Tuskegee quickly developed a national and international stature, attracting thousands of students from across the United States. However, it also drew hundreds of

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<sup>6</sup> On the “live dialogue” between Africa and the Americas, see J. Lorand Matory, “Afro-Atlantic Culture: On the Live Dialogue between Africa and the Americas,” in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and K. Anthony Appiah (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 36-44; and Matory, “The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba Nation,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999): 72-103; Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Historians Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley have highlighted the importance of analyzing the African Diaspora as both a “process and condition.” See Tiffany Patterson and Robin, D.G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World.” *African Studies Review* 43 (2000): 11-45.

students from across the African Diaspora, including the African continent, the English-speaking Caribbean, Central and South America, along with Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>8</sup>

The existing scholarship on Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute does not convey the school's transcultural, transnational population, nor does it adequately represent the international dimensions of Washingtonian racial uplift. Most interpretations of Tuskegee are based on the fourteen-volume published version of the Booker T. Washington Papers, compiled by Washington biographer Louis R. Harlan during the 1970s and 80s.<sup>9</sup> While historians are heavily indebted to Harlan's pioneering labor, his research was limited by the assumptions that guided interpretations of black American politics of the Civil Rights era. Washington and his followers were characterized as "accommodationists" while his rival W.E.B. Du Bois and his "Talented Tenth" adherents were positioned as more progressive (and internationalist) historical actors. Moreover, historians eager to prove the relevance of African-Americans to the national narrative of U.S. history peripheralized the international dimensions of the Tuskegee phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, the few documents on the school's international connections to places like Cuba and Puerto Rico that appear in the published volumes give the impression that Washington was little more than an agent of U.S.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to recall that Tuskegee was a normal school and not a university in this period. It was designed to educate students between the ages of fifteen and twenty years of age. The school did not offer advanced degrees until the 1920s. It became a university in 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Louis R. Harlan, et. al, *The Booker T. Washington Papers* 14 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972-1989).

<sup>10</sup> On African-American historiography in this period see August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). Examples of this scholarship are August Meier, *Negro Thought in America: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), Harlan, *The Making of a Black Leader*; and David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993). African-American gender historians have illustrated the inadequacy of the Du Bois-Washington narrative of the Jim Crow Era. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, and Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*

imperialism. Yet the published volumes, which contain approximately 5% of the entire collection housed at the Library of Congress, do not include a wealth of contrary evidence, especially the letters from students and others from throughout the African Diaspora who attended or expressed interest in attending the school. Therefore, an attention to the archives beyond the published documents offers a fuller appreciation of Tuskegee's historical significance. An examination of the collection as a whole reveals the enormous transnational traffic that came through Tuskegee, demonstrating that the Tuskegee phenomenon transcends the nation-based narrative of U.S. African-American history.

### **Tuskegee and the African Diaspora in the Age of Empire**

Tuskegee's emergence as an Afro-Diasporic institution occurred at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the midst of the "Age of Empire." Indeed this was the era when U.S. expansionism in the Caribbean and the Pacific occurred alongside expanding European colonization of Africa and Asia. In the U.S. South, this was the era of the "Nadir" as the historian Rayford Logan has called it, the period in which black southerners experienced legal and extra-legal forms of political disfranchisement. Imperialism and Jim Crow subjected people of African descent throughout the diaspora to new forms of exploitation and exclusion. But imperial transformations and the emerging Jim Crow order also brought previously disconnected African-descended peoples into contact with each other in an unprecedented manner, creating the possibility for cross-national strategies to negotiate imperial racialized power. The beginnings of the influx of U.S. capital in the Caribbean and Central America helped stimulate the reconfiguration of the Afro-

descended communities in these regions. A new map of the African Diaspora was emerging and Tuskegee, Alabama became the center of it.<sup>11</sup>

In 1898, Booker T. Washington was on his way to becoming the most powerful black leader in the United States. His notoriety rapidly increased after his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address, also known as the Atlanta “Compromise” speech, in which he told a predominantly white Southern audience: “in all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

Washington’s stature was enhanced by the support of prominent figures among the white U.S. American political and economic elite. After Washington’s speech, many, if not all, roads led to the little town in the middle of the state of Alabama. Visitors and their money flowed into the school to see Washington’s “miracle” of black education. Moreover, the annual Tuskegee Negro Conference, which attracted visitors to discuss the “Negro problem” made it the de-facto political center of Black America in the opening decade of the century, whether his northern black elite opponents liked it or not. His ability to extract resources from philanthropists and industrialists enabled him to make his educational institution, Tuskegee Institute, the most noteworthy school for people of African descent in the country at the time.

Tuskegee’s emergence as a model of African-American education enhanced Washington’s stature, not just in the U.S., but also throughout the world. The Tuskegee Principal was viewed by his admirers, black and white alike, as a leader of the “Negro

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<sup>11</sup> Jesse Hoffnung-Garskoff’s excellent essay on Arturo “Arthur” Schomburg and his Afro-Diasporic contemporaries in early twentieth century New York argues for the centrality of Harlem in the African Diaspora in the early twentieth century. I seek to complicate his mapping of the early twentieth century African Diaspora by arguing for the centrality of Tuskegee before Harlem’s ascendancy in the 1920s. See Jesse Hoffnung-Garskoff, “The Migrations of Arturo Schomburg: On Being *Antillano*, Negro, and Puerto Rican in New York, 1891-1938,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21 (Fall 2002): 3-49.



race” worldwide.<sup>12</sup> As European imperialism became more entrenched in Africa, white philanthropists and colonial officials saw the “Hampton-Tuskegee Idea” applicable to the African continent. As historians have shown, European colonial officials were eager to apply Washington’s model of “industrial education” to various educational and agricultural schemes in different parts of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

But Washington’s international influence was first felt, not in Africa, but in the U.S.’s “new possessions” in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The U.S.’s seizure of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines from Spain during the War of 1898, set in motion the expansion of U.S. American influence in the Caribbean and the Pacific. As is well-known, these territories became client states and/or colonies of the United States. After the conclusion of the war, Cuba and Puerto Rico were deeply integrated into the emerging U.S. American empire in Caribbean—Puerto Rico as a colony of the U.S. and Cuba, a neo-colony. As historians have shown, U.S. imperialism had cultural consequences as well, powerfully shaping the articulation of Cuban and Puerto Rican nationalism in this period.<sup>14</sup>

Washington’s ascendancy as a leader of the “Negro race” was enhanced by the U.S war against Spain in 1898. As the prospect of war became more evident, Washington

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<sup>12</sup> Louis Harlan has argued that Washington’s “outlook throughout his life remained that of a provincial southern America, though he traveled widely and had a worldwide following.” Louis R. Harlan, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, 266.

<sup>13</sup> Harlan, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, 266-277; Kenneth King, *Pan-Africanism and Education: A study of Race Philanthropy and Education in the Southern states of America and East Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971); and Andrew Zimmerman, “A German Alabama in Africa: The Tuskegee Expedition to German Togo and the Transnational Origins of West African Cotton Growers,” *American Historical Review* 110 (December 2005), 1362-1398.

<sup>14</sup> The many works of historian Louis Pérez has persuasively illustrated the economic, political, and cultural influence of U.S. Americans in Cuba. Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Carmen Diana Deere, “Here Come the Yankees!: The Rise and Decline of United States Colonies in Cuba, 1898-1930,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78 (December 1998), 729-65.

and other African-American leaders throughout the country saw the prospect of war presenting an opportunity to stake claims to equal citizenship. The eventual triumph of Jim Crow in the U.S. South has perhaps prompted us to overlook the fact that the impending war with Spain in 1898 seemed to offer a real possibility for African-American men to stave off the onrushing tide of disfranchisement. Many saw the war as an opportunity to prove their worthiness for genuine political and social equality through military service. Throughout the country, black activists called for the recruitment of African-American volunteers into the U.S. armed forces. Such arguments were palpably gendered. Military service, as historian Michele Mitchell has shown, could not only further claims to full U.S. citizenship, but it could also enable black men to demonstrate their manhood. If white men in the U.S. and Europe could take up the “White Man’s Burden” African-American men could make their own claim to imperial citizenship by articulating their own “Black Man’s Burden.”<sup>15</sup>

As black men were volunteering for military service, the Tuskegee Principal found himself in the position of a broker for U.S. American interests in Cuba who needed “Negroes” for their projects on the island after the war ended. As Washington’s notoriety increased, many U.S. Americans sought him out to recommend black folks for work in the “new possessions.” As is well known, powerful whites, including President Theodore Roosevelt, were asking Washington to recommend African-Americans for government

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<sup>15</sup> Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 51-75. See also Willard Gatewood, *Black Americans and the White Man’s Burden* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 22-40; and Harvey Neptune, “Manly Rivalries and Mopsies: Gender, Sexuality, and Sexuality Nationality in United States-Occupied Trinidad,” *Radical History Review* 87 (Fall 2003), 78-95. President William McKinley eventually allowed African-American men in select states to enlist as volunteers in the U.S. military later that year. The U.S. invading army not only included the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalries, two regular black regiments, but also a number of newly formed volunteer infantries, including the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois, the 9<sup>th</sup> “Immunes,” and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Kansas Infantry. See Gatewood, *Black Americans*, PAGES; and Willard Gatewood, “*Smoked Yankees*”.

positions in the U.S. But Roosevelt was just one of hundreds of others who sought out Washington for guidance on how to incorporate “Negroes” into their plans. As the U.S. occupation of Cuba took shape, Washington received numerous requests from white missionary, charitable, and business interests to recommend African-Americans for their interests in Cuba. In November 1899, Osgood Welsh of the Constancia Sugar Company asked Washington to send to Cuba “a few proven men” to become “the advance guard of workers in the cane fields of the island.” However, Welsh made sure the Tuskegee Principal understood that his interest in black workers was simply “a practical question of bringing together a supply and a demand.” Thus, Welsh informed Washington that while “would have nothing to do with a sudden irruption in large numbers of American negroes into Cuba,” he would “under intelligent guidance bear a hand in making the experiment of enlarging the field of American negro work.”<sup>16</sup>

But white U.S. Americans were not the only ones interested bringing “Negroes” to the new possessions. African-Americans themselves sought to create their own opportunities in places like Cuba and the Philippines. The U.S. intervention revived emigrationist sentiment among African-Americans. Aspiring black entrepreneurs, clergymen, and soldiers spearheaded the call to consider relocation to Cuba and the Philippines. Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, numerous colonizationist/emigrationist movements had emerged among people of African descent in the U.S. At the turn of the century, the movement was largely inspired by the heroism of Afro-Cuban insurgents,

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<sup>16</sup> Osgood Welsh to BTW, 10 November 1899, Reel 156, GC, BTWP, LC. A few weeks later, Welsh backed off from his idea, informing Washington that the “social and political condition of the island is as I have discovered, so unsettled that I question the wisdom of bringing here just now even one negro from the United States. Many people here believe that sooner or later the race question will assert itself and there is a fear that the U.S. may try to send large numbers of negroes to the island.” Welsh to BTW, 29 November 1899, Reel 156, GC, BTWP, LC.

especially Antonio Maceo, and tales of absent color lines on the island. Elite African-Americans such as John L. Waller were a major force in reviving emigrationist sentiments in Kansas. Another black Midwesterner, James Nathaniel Hughes, the father of the famous poet Langston Hughes, seems to have felt the same way. In late 1901, he left his pregnant wife, Carrie, behind to try to make a life for himself in Cuba. While Hughes's activities on the island are unknown, whatever venture he sought for himself seems to have failed because he returned to the U.S. the following year. These tales of Cuba as a racial paradise notwithstanding, most African-Americans did not emigrate to the island.<sup>17</sup>

But to be satisfied with highlighting the futility of black emigrationist dreams, as historians have tended to do, leads one to ignore the experiences of those who did emigrate abroad. One of these was R.M.R. Nelson, a Black American entrepreneur from New York who engaged in a variety of business activities in Cuba for more than two decades. Like Hughes, the enterprising Nelson viewed Cuba as a place of economic opportunity for people of African descent. "I came to Cuba in July '98 as a 'camp follower,'" Nelson informed Booker Washington in a 1904 letter, "and ever since I have been preaching riches in Cuba." Nelson, who was keenly attuned to investing trends on the island, asked Washington and "other representative Afro-Americans" to invest in a land project in eastern Cuba, a region that was being flooded with U.S. American capital. While Nelson was unable to secure Washington's support for this project, he continued

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<sup>17</sup> Willard Gatewood, *Black Americans*, 166-79; and Randall B. Woods, *A Black Odyssey: John Lewis Waller and the Promise of American Life, 1878-1900* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1981), and Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too Sing America* Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10-11. Despite his failure in Cuba, Hughes continued undeterred to act on his belief that he could not realize his ambitions in the United States. He eventually settled in Mexico. While Langston Hughes's vexed relationship with his father has been well-documented, his father's travels to Latin America significantly influenced the poet's cosmopolitan understanding of people of African descent. See chapter three below.

undeterred to do business on the island into the 1920s, courting “representative Afro-Americans” along the way. Two decades later, he emphatically affirmed his reasons for remaining in Cuba by insisting that on the island, “I CAN BE what I am, More than "HALF A MAN.”<sup>18</sup>

The activities of Nelson and other African-Americans in Cuba show that U.S. expansionism was not simply a projection of white racial privilege abroad. The U.S. intervention, even with the presence of white southerners within its apparatus, did not replicate Jim Crow in Cuba and Puerto Rico. While comparativist historians have shown how imperialism helped expand U.S. racism to the Caribbean, few have explored the ways African-descended peoples developed transnational strategies to engage these changing forms of oppression.<sup>19</sup> African-Americans used whatever connections they could—military service, political connections, among other strategies—to find a place for themselves within the new imperial structure. It is within this larger context of African-American engagements with U.S. interventionism that one must situate the linkages Booker T. Washington’s school forged with people of African descent outside the United States.

### **Forging Diaspora on the Margins of Empire**

Tuskegee’s emergence as a diasporic institution originated with Washington’s effort to recruit students from Cuba and Puerto Rico in the summer of 1898. Washington

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<sup>18</sup> R.M.R. Nelson to BTW, 18 June 1904, Reel 247, GC, BTWP, LC; Nelson to Charles Henry Douglass, 18 October 1924, Records of the Macon’s Douglass Theatre, Digital Library of Georgia, <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/douglass/dbr080.php> (Emphasis in original). In this letter, Nelson tried to get Douglass to invest in “Beso Dulce,” a soft drink that he claimed was created by an unnamed Afro-Cuban businessman. Nelson informed Douglass that he was offering him “THE SOLE RIGHT to Manufacture and Sell A Black Man's Discovery in the State of Georgia! A Beverage that WILL SELL BIGGER THAN Coca Cola.” Four years earlier, Nelson was courting Garveyites and Afro-Cubans to participate in his business schemes.

<sup>19</sup> Aline Helg, “Black Men, Racial Stereotyping, and Violence in the U.S. South and Cuba at the Turn of the Century,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (July 2000), 577.

skillfully worked his way into the community of U.S. social reformers who sought to carry out their work on the islands. In “Industrial Education for Cuban Negroes,” published in the *Christian Register* in August 1898, he argued that Tuskegee and Hampton could play important roles in helping Cuba recover from the destruction engendered by its thirty-year struggle for independence.

One-half of the population of Cuba is composed of mulattoes or Negroes. All who have visited Cuba agree that they need to put them on their feet the strength that they get by thorough intellectual, religious, and industrial training, such as is given at Hampton and Tuskegee. In the present depleted condition of the island, industrial education for the young men and women is a matter of the first importance. It will do for them what it is doing for our people in the South.<sup>20</sup>

While Washington left no evidence of his precise motivations for bringing Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent to Tuskegee, it seems reasonable to conclude that his program fit nicely with his own political agenda at the time. Educating some of the “natives” in the new U.S. imperial possessions would certainly enhance Tuskegee’s legitimacy, not only among U.S. American whites, but also within African-American leadership circles, where an increasing number of critics were becoming unsettled by Washington’s growing popularity. Taking up the education of “foreign Negroes,” would allow Washington to enhance the power of his influential patronage network, known as the “Tuskegee Machine.”

Whatever his reasons might have been, Washington quickly began his recruitment effort in the summer of 1898. To get his project going, he utilized his well-honed

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<sup>20</sup> “Industrial Education for Cuban Negroes,” *Christian Register*, 18 Aug. 1898, p. 455

“navigation” skills that were making him the most prominent black educator in the U.S. The Tuskegee Principal’s objective was to find black people and sympathetic whites who would support his project. As he had been doing since he founded Tuskegee, the “Wizard,” as he was eventually called by some of his admirers and critics, worked his magic. MENTION HIS SUCCESSFUL SOLICITATION OF FUNDS FROM WHITE PHILANTHROPISTS AND THE U.S. OCCUPATION GOVTS IN CUBA AND PUERTO RICO.

ALSO THE TRANSLATION OF UP FROM SLAVERY INTO SPANISH AND ITS DISSEMINATION IN CUBA.

Washington’s navigation skills are clearly evident in his recruitment effort. One of the ways Tuskegee was able to transport international students from port cities to the school was by soliciting the support of railway companies. In the fall of 1898, the school sent out a request for a transportation pass for a Tuskegee recruiter to Henry B. Plant, the founder of the massive railway and steamship empire that linked the South to the Caribbean. The Plant System included railways throughout Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, steamship service from Tampa to Key West and Havana, as well as several hotels along the coasts of Florida. In early October 1898, Washington contacted Plant to see if he could get a free pass for a recruiter to travel from Alabama to Cuba. Remarkably, Plant granted the pass a few weeks later. However, he impressed upon Washington that the Tuskegee agent traveling with the pass would “say nothing whatever of the receipt of the enclosed transportation...as the issuance of this transportation I would not like to be considered as a precedent for similar action in other cases.” Plant’s granting of the pass to Tuskegee is striking, since it took place in the moment when

conditions facing African-American travelers were becoming more difficult in light of encroaching Jim Crow segregation. Thus, it is not surprising that Plant did not want word to get out that his company was granting free transit to a person of African descent.<sup>21</sup>

Tuskegee's ability to recruit students from the Caribbean was also facilitated by its geographic proximity to the region. As the map illustrates, it was fairly accessible by rail and steamship. The school advertised the advantages of its geographic location in its annual catalog:

“Tuskegee is forty miles east of Montgomery, and five miles from Chehaw Station, on the line of the Western Railway of Alabama, with which it connected by the Tuskegee Railroad. It is but one hundred and thirty-six miles west of Atlanta. While it enjoys all of the advantages of access that a large city does, it is at the same time, far enough removed from the main line of travel to make it free from the danger of contagious diseases. The Western Union and the Postal Telegraph Companies, and the Southern Express Company, have offices in town.”<sup>22</sup>

Washington's Cuban recruitment effort illustrates the complex relationship between Afro-diasporic peoples and U.S. American capital. He used the same skills that he had employed to convince whites to do right by the Negro in the United States to launch his Cuban and Puerto Rican program. Washington's recruitment strategies show that like the formation of the African diaspora in the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade, diasporization at the turn of the century was made possible by the transnational structures of empire. If black sailors and slave rebels took advantage of transport systems that were

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<sup>21</sup> Henry B. Plant to BTW, 22 October 1898, Reel 142, GC, BTWP, LC.

<sup>22</sup> *The Twenty-Second Annual Catalogue of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1902-1903* (No publication info), 11.



designed for their exploitation during the slave trade, black mobile subjects in the post-emancipation period also used the “tools of empire,” as historian Daniel Headrick called them, for their own purposes. The creation of nation-states in the Americas did not curtail this long-standing practice of travel and communication.<sup>23</sup>

The correspondence from abroad in the Tuskegee files of the Booker T. Washington Papers documents the enormous transnational traffic that passed through the school. Much of this material came from prospective students. Throughout the opening decades of the twentieth century, Washington received thousands of letters from students and their parents throughout the African Diaspora expressing their interest in attending Tuskegee. Letters of interest poured in from across the United States, as well as from areas as far away as the Gold Coast of West Africa; British Guiana; Costa Rica; Brazil, Dominican Republic; and Haiti. Washington and the Tuskegee story tapped into the deep desires of people of African descent to obtain an education in the Age of Empire. Washington’s own recollections of these desires in his autobiography: “it was a whole race trying to go to school” could have applied to many other peoples of African descent at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

Who were the folks in Cuba and Puerto Rico who were part of the “whole race trying to go to school”? And why did they want to go to this far away place in the middle of rural Alabama? The multitude of correspondence from Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent in the Booker T. Washington Papers help answer these questions. The letters, which were sometimes written in Spanish and at others written in English with

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Headrick, *Tools of Empire: Technology and European Expansion in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). On Black Sailors during the slave trade see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, Reprint, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed. (New York: Bedford St. Martin’s Press, 200), 53.

varying degrees of fluency, communicate the stories of folks who have been largely overlooked by historians. While African-American efforts at getting an education in the post-emancipation period have been well documented, mobilization for schooling by Afro-Cubans and Afro-Puerto Ricans is not as well known. Instead of examining these movements as comparably discrete phenomena, the analysis presented here highlights the convergence of African-American and other Afro-diasporic pro-education efforts since they did, in fact, come together at Tuskegee in this period.

The “why” question is in many ways easier to answer. For Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent at the turn of the century, there were few alternatives for advanced schooling. Nearly all of their letters highlighted the lack of educational opportunities in their homelands. Education on all levels had always been limited in both islands during the Spanish colonial era. In Cuba, the destruction heaped by the war of independence and the collapse of Spanish colonial rule only intensified Afro-Cuban aspirations for an education. Juana María Cárdenas and Carmen Navarro, bluntly informed the Tuskegee Principal in 1900 that they had “strive[d] in our country to fulfill this desire but we cannot do it here and now all our hopes are in your hands.”<sup>25</sup>

A good number of prospective students who sought admission to Tuskegee were black tradesmen struggling to navigate their way through the challenges of Cuban society in the moment of imperial transition. Not surprisingly, they found Tuskegee’s curriculum of “industrial education” especially appealing. One such letter came from Eleno Lino of Havana in 1902:

Having heard by a friend of mine, the opportunities afforded by your night school  
to [the] poor colored men who are anxious[sic] to have a better education I write

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<sup>25</sup> Juana María Cárdenas and Carmen Navarro to BTW, n.d. GC, BTWP, LC.

you these few lines to see if there is any room for me. I am a Cuban by birth, 18 years of age strong, able bodied and willing to work. I am a taylor[sic] by trade and could pass examination in reading, writing, add[ition], subtract[ion], multiply and divide, but I do not know English. This letter is [written]-by a dear friend. Hoping to have an early answer from you encouraging my desires. I am your humble servant.

Eleno Lino<sup>26</sup>

Lino was part of a wave of Afro-Cuban skilled workers who viewed Tuskegee as a place where they could refine their skills and advance themselves socially and economically. What we see in a number of these letters are the hopes and aspirations of segments of what historian Michele Mitchell has called in an African-American context, the “black aspiring class,” skilled workers who belonged neither to the rural laboring majority, nor to the educated black elite, who sought opportunities to advance themselves in the face of racism and colonialism.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth centuries, hundreds of students from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, the English-speaking Caribbean, and the African continent attended Tuskegee. The multitude of images of nameless black students working on the school grounds churned out by the Tuskegee propaganda machine might lead one to assume that they were all black southerners. Yet while students from Alabama and Georgia comprised a one-third to one-half of the school’s annual enrollment, many also arrived from all over the U.S. and other parts of the African Diaspora. As the opening decade of the century unfolded, the school’s student body

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<sup>26</sup> Eleno Lino to Booker T. Washington, 20 September 1902, Reel 683, SR, TR, BTWP, LC.

<sup>27</sup> Michele Mitchell, “Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History,” *Gender and History* 11 (November 1999): 443.

became even more varied as students from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, Africa, and other parts of the Caribbean and Central America arrived in greater numbers. The contemporary category “African-American” thus obscures the presence of international students at the school as well as the great diversity within the group of African-American students themselves. Accounting for the transcultural quality of the student population enables us to avoid the pitfall of imposing a pre-existing notion of national or cultural “difference” informed by contemporary understandings of racial identifications on the past and can illuminate conflict and distinctiveness as historical actors viewed them. When tensions at Tuskegee did emerge it was usually rooted in the power dynamics between school administrators and students rather than the cultural incompatibility between U.S. American and foreign-born black students.

Cubans and Puerto Ricans were very much a part of the cultural life of students at the school. By 1910, a “Cuban and Porto Rican Club” had formed. Antonio Escabí, one of the club’s members from Puerto Rico, asked if the group could have permission to take a day off to “celebrate our national holiday.” Interestingly, the “national holiday” they requested was March 22, which was actually the anniversary date of the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico. Since Puerto Rico did not have an independence day, it is striking that these students chose to celebrate abolition instead, highlighting their own identification with emancipated slaves. Since students from Cuba and Puerto Rico comprised the vast majority of the student’s foreign population during the first decade of the century, it is not surprising that they bonded at Tuskegee.

The experiences of Tuskegee's alumni highlight the school's impact in Cuba and Puerto Rico. One of the more noteworthy of Cuban graduates was Luis Delfín Valdés, who arrived at Tuskegee with one of the first groups of Afro-Cuban students in 1899. By 1906, he was informing Washington of his "great love for drawing" and his ambition to be an architect.<sup>28</sup> In many ways, Valdés personified Washington's objectives when he initiated the Tuskegee-Cuba program: to educate a student from Cuba and send him/her back to the island with skills to advance the development of his people. After his graduation in 1908, he returned to Cuba and established a successful career as an architect. More importantly, he became one of the founding members of the Club Atenas, the most prominent Afro-Cuban society on the island before Castro. Valdés employed the skills that he learned at Tuskegee to design the organization's headquarters, an impressive building which opened to much fanfare in 1929 that became an important center of Afro-Cuban social and cultural life during the Republican period (The building still stands at the corner of Zulueta and Apodaca streets in Havana today).

Tuskegee's impact on the African Diaspora extended beyond the experiences of the students who attended the school. Throughout the first two decades of the century, Washington and his institute remained a source of inspiration for many Cubans of African descent. This is clear in the formation of the Instituto Booker T. Washington, an organization initiated autonomously by Afro-Cubans in Havana. The Instituto was designed to bring the "Tuskegee Idea" of industrial training to Cuba. In 1905, Emilio Céspedes Casado, the institute's founder, informed the Tuskegee Principal that he and his brother had founded the school and named it after Washington. "We have established a

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<sup>28</sup> Luís Delfín Valdés to BTW, 6 October 1906, Reel 683, TR, BTWP, LC; and Valdés to BTW, 11 May 1908, Reel 684, TR, BTWP, LC.

educational institution in Havana for youth of the colored race,” Céspedes informed Washington. “We feel genuine admiration for your personage and we wish you a long life so that you can continue your truly advanced labor.” Céspedes asked for a portrait of the Tuskegee Principal to put in the school’s main room so as to “inspire Cuban youth” to follow his example.

### **Conclusion**

The bits of evidence I have shared with you today highlights Tuskegee’s centrality to the process of diasporization between African-Americans and non-U.S. persons of African descent in the early twentieth century. Nation-based historical frameworks do not adequately represent the transnational and transcultural traffic that passed through the small school in the middle of rural Alabama in this period. In this way, the story of the Tuskegee’s connection to Cuba, Puerto Rico and other parts of the African Diaspora challenges us to re-examine our understanding of the phenomenon of Washingtonian racial uplift. Rather than characterizing the Tuskegee program in Cuba and Puerto Rico as simply a mechanism of white supremacy, examining the ways Afro-Cubans and Afro-Puerto Ricans interpreted the message of “up from slavery” reveals their ability to reshape Washington’s brand of racial uplift. In this sense, we see that Marcus Garvey, Washington’s well-known disciple, was but one of thousands of Afro-descendants outside the United States who repackaged the ideas of the so-called “Great Accommodator” into their own vision of racial self-improvement. Their stories reveal how the overlapping worlds created by the U.S.-Caribbean empire enabled people of African descent in Cuba and the U.S. to develop cross-national survival strategies to stave off the effects of racialized imperial power.

Perhaps no one document illustrates of Tuskegee's significance in a diasporic context than Julio Despaigne's April 1906 letter to Washington. Despaigne, a native of Guantánamo, Cuba, was one of the Afro-Cuban students who attended Tuskegee in the opening decades of the century. Despaigne must have felt particularly reflective on the day he wrote his principal. Witnessing the growth of the institution, due in part to the presence of international students such as himself, Despaigne suggested to Washington that it would be a good idea to bring "members of our race who are still in Africa" to study at the school. "I believe with [a] good train[ing]," he wrote, "those people will rise nicely. Therefore, I wish you look for a way to bring one hundred African[s] here. Fifty males and fifty females." After warning Washington of the opposition such a program would encounter from "enemies of the Negro," Despaigne suddenly posed the following question to his principal: "Are the Phillipino[s] negros?"<sup>29</sup>

Despaigne's letter highlights the ways that his experience at Tuskegee enabled him to wrestle with his own self-understanding as a person of African descent in Cuba and a member of a larger collective who were objects of imperial power. Moreover, Despaigne's preoccupation with the African continent, shows the importance it had for some of the Cubans of African descent who found themselves in this mini-African Diaspora in the deep South. Despaigne's experience and the experience of his fellow classmates, encourage us to come up with conceptual frameworks that capture the complicated ways they came to identify themselves as racialized subjects. His written reflections provide a glimpse of diaspora in action by revealing the complicated ways persons of African descent struggled to understand the forces that formed them in the Age of Empire.

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<sup>29</sup> Despaigne to BTW, 7 April 1906, TR, SR, Reel 684, BTWP, LC.