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Carey Snyder

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The Global Dialogics of the *New Age*

CAREY SNYDER
Ohio University
snyderc3@ohio.edu

ABSTRACT

The London-based weekly the *New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage from 1907 to 1922, was known for promoting spirited debates on politics, literature, and the arts. Scholars have been attentive to what Ann Ardis terms the magazine's 'unusual commitment to [...] Bakhtinian dialogics in the public sphere', but less so to the role that the letters column played in facilitating these often contentious, often transnational debates. This essay argues that the letters column functioned as a forum for linking not only individual readers and contributors from around the world, but also wider discursive and periodical communities. A case study of global dialogics, the essay focuses on an eleven-month debate that unfolded in *New Age* correspondence concerning the so-called black peril — the purported epidemic of black men attempting to rape white women in South Africa, which historians today regard as a moral panic fuelled by a desire to reinforce white supremacy. The flames of the panic were stoked by the Umtali case of 1910, in which Lord Gladstone commuted the death sentence of an Umtali native convicted of attempted rape to life imprisonment. This decision sparked mass protests and petitions among the white community in South Africa and a heated discussion about race and racism that reverberated throughout the empire, including in the columns of the *New Age*. The letters column served as an international forum, drawing in white settlers from Johannesburg, *Crisis* editor and NAACP founder W. E. B. Du Bois, Sudanese-Egyptian writer Dusé Mohamed Ali, and British suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, among others. This essay examines the gendered and racial politics of this debate and how it was shaped by its specific periodical context and by the national and ideological contexts of its interlocutors.

KEYWORDS

dialogics, black peril, letters, correspondence, global networks, socialist press, Pan-African, *New Age*, *African Times and Orient Review*, *Crisis*, Dusé Mohamed, W. E. B. Du Bois, A. R. Orage, Beatrice Hastings, J. M. Kennedy, Emily Wilding Davison

The London-based socialist weekly, the *New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage from 1907 to 1922, was known for promoting spirited debates on politics, literature, and the arts. This dedication to freewheeling, multidirectional exchanges has prompted Ann Ardis to argue that the magazine was unique in its ‘commitment to what we might now term Bakhtinian dialogics in the public sphere’.¹ Scholars have been attentive to the way that Orage, in concert with his romantic and editorial partner, Beatrice Hastings, achieved this editorial aim by pitting contributors with opposing viewpoints against one another, but have paid less attention to the controversy-generating potential of correspondence. This crucial function of letters, both within and beyond the *New Age*, warrants closer attention. Arguably the most overtly dialogical part of magazines, letters columns put multiple perspectives and voices directly in conversation with one another. In the *New Age*, the letters column was also a site of transnational dialogue, serving as a kind of hub or switchboard that not only linked individual readers with other readers and contributors from around the world, but also facilitated dialogue between wider discursive and periodical communities. In this way, I argue, the letters column facilitated the magazine’s unusual openness to discord and dissent, providing an important space for debate across ideological, racial, and national boundaries.

A distribution map published in the 3 March 1910 supplement of the *New Age* highlights the magazine’s global reach (see Fig. 1). With this image, the magazine boasts a readership that stretches from Melbourne to Johannesburg to Jamaica, a range mirrored by the geographical diversity of its content and contributors list. As a socialist review, the *New Age* professed an interest in oppressed peoples of other nations, conveyed by Orage’s characterization of the magazine in a 1909 editorial as ‘pro-natives everywhere’.² Anna Snaith affirms the magazine’s international focus, observing that ‘nearly every page engages with imperial politics or colonial affairs’.³ It provided a forum for such anti-colonial writers as the Sudanese-Egyptian journalist Dusé Mohamed (later Dusé Mohamed Ali), Irish activist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, and Indian nationalist B. K. Das. At the same time, it provided a platform for reactionary conservatives like J. M. Kennedy, a writer who, as Charles Ferrall notes, genuinely defended the institution of slavery.⁴ This heterogeneity of voices and viewpoints makes the politics of the *New Age* notoriously difficult to pin down.⁵ More than supporting a particular political or ideological stance, this was a periodical committed to incorporating a diversity of perspectives (in Hastings’s words, ‘the contras as well as the pros of any argument’).⁶ Hence it published feminist alongside antifeminist polemics; and racist vitriol alongside anti-imperialist and Pan-African perspectives. The letters are an important, neglected site for uncovering the transnational scope of these often-contentious debates.

- 1 Ann Ardis, ‘The Dialogics of Modernism(s) in the *New Age*’, *Modernism/modernity*, 14.3 (2007), 407–34 (p. 409). Friederike Eigler provides a useful gloss on the concept of the dialogic first articulated in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination*: ‘No voice exists in isolation but always relates to, is shaped by, and competes with other voices’ ‘Feminist Criticism and Bakhtin’s Dialogic Principle: Making the Transition from Theory to Textual Analysis’, *Women in German Yearbook*, 11 (1995), 189–203 (p. 191).
- 2 Orage’s conceptualization of the ‘native’ conflates race and colonial status with class-based oppression, as his concluding statement makes clear: ‘If everybody below the poverty-line in England turned black, we should realise the extent to which slavery prevails among us.’ ‘Notes of the Week’, *New Age*, 4.23 (1 April 1909), 455.
- 3 Anna Snaith, *Modernist Voyages: Colonial Women Writers in London, 1890–1945* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 117.
- 4 Charles Ferrall, ‘The *New Age* and the Emergence of Reactionary Modernism Before the Great War’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38.3 (1992), 653–67 (p. 657).
- 5 Lee Garver provides a useful overview of the critical debate surrounding the magazine’s political leanings in his article, ‘Neither Progressive Nor Reactionary: Reassessing the Cultural Politics of the *New Age*’, *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 2.1 (2011), 86–115.
- 6 D. Triformis [Beatrice Hastings], ‘A Correction Corrected’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 6.26 (28 April 1910), p. 620.



Fig. 1 *New Age* Distribution Map. Supplement to the *New Age* (3 March 1910), 8

As a case study of the magazine’s global dialogics, I focus here on a dynamic eleven-month debate that unfolded in *New Age* correspondence concerning the so-called black peril — the purported upsurge of black men raping or attempting to rape white women in Southern Africa.⁷ Most historians today concur that the peril was greatly exaggerated and sensationalized (as the label ‘peril’ itself suggests), a moral panic fuelled by the perceived vulnerability of the white ruling class among a majority black

7 Lucy Valerie Graham notes that the term ‘typically refers to the period of social hysteria prevalent in South Africa from 1890 to 1914’ though ‘earlier scares set in South Africa can be traced further back in time, and the deployment of “black peril” anxieties has been a recurring strategy in South African politics throughout the twentieth century and into the post-apartheid environment.’ *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

population.⁸ The construction of black male bodies as savage and sexually dangerous justified the legislation of the death penalty for even *attempted* rape in Rhodesia and the execution of numerous black men on slender to no evidence, while the commonplace sexual violence of white men against black women went unpunished.⁹ As John Pape writes in an article on the subject, ‘The “perils” were necessary in order to solidify racial and gender differences and thereby to construct a white and male supremacist social order’.¹⁰ The flames of the peril were stoked by the Umtali case of December 1910, in which Lord Gladstone, the High Commissioner for Southern Africa, commuted the death sentence of an Umtali¹¹ native named Alukuleta, who had been convicted of attempted rape, to life imprisonment. Possibly influenced by the history of wrongful convictions of black men,¹² his decision sparked mass protests and petitions within the white community in Rhodesia and South Africa, and heated discussions about race and racism that reverberated throughout the empire.

Writing under the cheeky pseudonym ‘S. Verdad’ (Spanish for ‘it’s the truth’), *New Age* staffer J. M. Kennedy took up the case in his foreign affairs column, sparking responses from readers across the globe. Along with ordinary readers from South Africa, Australia, and England, these responses included an article from acclaimed author Dusé Mohamed, along with letters from leading African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois and British suffragette Emily Wilding Davison. As well-known figures within major social movements — for race and gender equality respectively — these correspondents arguably spoke not just as individuals, but as representatives of collectives. Moreover, their close ties to culturally significant magazines (Du Bois, as editor of *Crisis*; Davison, as a regular contributor to *Votes for Women*; and Mohamed, as soon-to-be editor of the *African Times and Orient Review*), makes for an extraordinarily direct instance of the linkages of a periodical network. Germane here is Lucy Delap’s concept of the ‘periodical community,’ comprised of ‘sets of journals that identify each other as important players, [and] promote debate and controversy between each other’.¹³ The *New Age* letters column functions, then, as a space where the distinct communities represented by these different periodicals can engage in direct dialogue, with an unusual degree of candour.

The black peril debate raised issues that were especially relevant to these other periodicals — of racial discrimination, gender inequality, sexual violence, and political disenfranchisement. However, unlike *Crisis* or *Votes for Women*, the *New Age* was not an organ or a special interest paper and, so, provided a forum where contributors with staunchly opposing viewpoints could talk to one another. I have written elsewhere about the black peril debate in relation to the seriality of the letter form and have explored with Leif Sorenson more generally the way that ‘modernist-era letters pages served as spaces [...] for readers to negotiate their relationship to a magazine and other readers’.¹⁴ Here, my focus is the way that the gendered and racial politics of this debate were

8 See for example Graham, *State of Peril*; Jock McCulloch, *Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902–1935* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); John Pape, ‘Black and White: The “Perils of Sex” in Colonial Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16.4 (1990), 699–720; and Timothy Keegan, ‘Gender, Degeneration and Sexual Danger: Imagining Race and Class in South Africa, ca. 1912’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27.3 (2001), 459–77.

9 According to McCulloch, from 1902 to 1916 in colonial Zimbabwe, up to twenty black men were executed for sexual crime (and over two hundred jailed), but no white men were executed (p. 4).

10 Pape, ‘Black and White’, p. 699.

11 City in colonial Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), known today as Mutare.

12 See Pape, ‘Black and White’, p. 704.

13 Lucy Delap, ‘Feminist and Anti-Feminist Encounters in Edwardian Britain’, *Historical Research*, 78.201 (2005), 377–99 (p. 388, footnote 48).

14 Carey Snyder and Leif Sorenson, ‘Letters to the Editor as a Serial Form’, *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 9.1 (2018), 123–46 (p. 123).

shaped by its position within a broader periodical network, and by the ideological and national contexts of its interlocutors.

Writing as S. Verdad, the conservative columnist J. M. Kennedy detonated the *New Age* black peril debate on 16 February 1911, by writing of Gladstone's decision regarding the Umtali case: 'If the unanimous voice of Democracy is right, it follows that his Lordship must be wrong in reprieving a native for an attempted outrage on a white woman [...] [Since] the black native is racially inferior [...] his punishment should be much more severe.'¹⁵ This bigoted view chimes with Kennedy's racist ruminations from the previous month, when, writing of the so-called American 'negro question', he declares, 'To give such beings complete liberty [...] was the greatest mistake ever made in the history of the American continent'.¹⁶ In a polemical style characteristic of the *New Age*, Kennedy's 'Verdad' thus provoked a multifaceted debate about race, gender, and sexuality that raged for nearly a year, though he remained, from then on, on the sidelines.

While the *New Age* gave Kennedy a platform for airing such baldly racist views, it likewise gave considerable space to the staunch anti-imperialist and emerging Pan-Africanist Dusé Mohamed, who effectively rebuts 'Verdad' the following week. A regular contributor to the *New Age*, Mohamed had just published *In the Land of the Pharaohs*, a fervid nationalist's history of Egypt. Later that year, he would attend the First Universal Races Congress in London, which in turn would inspire him to launch, in 1912, the *African Times and Orient Review* — both landmarks in the Pan-African movement. Despite Kennedy's blatant prejudice against black Africans, Kennedy had reviewed the Egyptian-born author's book in surprisingly respectful and favourable terms in the same issue in which he denounced Gladstone's ruling.¹⁷ A second *New Age* review published in the March 1911 *Literary Supplement* was equally favorable, praising the book's impartiality as a remarkable feat given that Mohamed's own brother and father were killed in the British quelling of a nationalist uprising in Alexandria.¹⁸ Hence, in part thanks to the *New Age* endorsement of his work, it was as a lauded author, notable anti-imperialist, and future editor of a culturally significant journal, that Mohamed entered the black peril debate.

Mohamed's journalism for the *New Age*, including that related to the peril, anticipates the focus and mission of the *African Times and Orient Review*. The journal's masthead proclaims its intention to represent the 'Interests of the Coloured Races of the World' (Fig. 2), and its first issue elaborates on the urgency of this mission, at a time when the editorial claimed that 'garbled and inaccurate statements' about people of colour were freely circulating in the European press. The journal sought to rectify these distortions and to shine a light on racial injustice, with the confidence that 'African and Oriental wrongs have but to be made manifest to be righted'.¹⁹ The paper's readership, contributors, and contents all spanned the globe, and its subject matter included such diverse topics as 'British imperial policy, Indian politics, Egyptian nationalism, US race relations, Japanese imperialism, immigration restrictions, and a host of religious practices and cultural traditions'.²⁰ It was warmly received in the *New Age* for its varied and 'authoritative' contents and for its cultural significance: 'We congratulate the editor

15 S. Verdad [J. M. Kennedy], 'Foreign Affairs', *New Age*, 8.16 (16 February 1911), 364.

16 S. Verdad [J. M. Kennedy], 'Foreign Affairs', *New Age*, 8.7 (15 December 1910), 148.

17 J. M. Kennedy, 'Land of the Pharaohs' (Book Review), *New Age*, 8.16 (16 February 1911), 366–67.

18 Anonymous, 'Land of the Pharaohs' (Book Review), *New Age*, 8.20 (16 March 1911), *Literary Supplement*, 2–3.

19 Anonymous [Dusé Mohamed], Foreword, *African Times and Orient Review*, 1.1 (July 1912), iii.

20 Thomas Smith, *Emancipation without Equality: Pan-African Activism and the Global Color Line* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), p. 138.

and writers — including Harvard PhD W. E. B. Du Bois, who would soon join the thread, along with the late, esteemed poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar — to ‘give the lie to the oft-repeated slander that the Negro is incapable of high intelligence’.²³ Regarding the persecution of black men in South Africa as analogous to the lynching of African Americans in the U.S. South, Mohamed shifts the blame from black men to white women, whom he sees as false accusers and instigators of racial violence. Given the shaky evidence of the case, Mohamed concludes that Gladstone’s ruling was ‘the correct policy, and the only safe one; and this, notwithstanding the hysterical shrieks of bloodthirsty Boer women’.²⁴

In the crossfire that ensued in the Correspondence section, South African readers took issue with both columnists’ characterizations of the case. The Boer correspondent S. Coetzee, for instance, objects at once to Kennedy’s ‘preposterous’ remarks on the ‘subject of natives’ and to Mohamed’s slandering of Boer women.²⁵ G. F. Riordan of Johannesburg concurs with Kennedy’s assessment of growing racial antagonism in South Africa, but criticizes his ‘jingoistic’ perspective.²⁶ Later, other South African readers join the thread, along with a colonial administrator from the West Indies, and a reader from Australia. In *Print Culture Histories Beyond the Metropolis*, James Connolly and Patrick Collier address the metropolitan bias in histories of print culture, which too often imagine ‘provincial cities, rural communities, or colonial outposts as passive recipients of a culture moving out from the metropolitan centre’.²⁷ The far-flung readers who join the black peril thread are anything but passive, as they actively shape or redirect the conversation, often purporting to correct the record from their own perspective and geographic location. While these correspondents reference coverage of the peril in South African newspapers, their choice to write into a metropolitan periodical suggests that they are making sense of the local in relation to broader imperial and transnational frameworks.

Readers like these were encouraged to see their letters as central to the paper’s editorial aim of open-ended debate. The high status the *New Age* accorded to Correspondence is suggested by the amount of space devoted to it — letters often comprised 20 per cent or more of the total page count, and, starting in 1909, letter writers were listed individually in the Table of Contents. This practice elevated the ordinary reader to the status of contributor, while spotlighting the not-infrequent contributions of high-profile readers. One contemporary commented that though the magazine’s circulation may have been modest (averaging 3,000 per issue), its influence was considerable, given that ‘the men and women who read it are the men and women who count — people who [...] hold important positions in the civic, social political and artistic worlds, and who eagerly disseminate the seeds of thought they pick up from the study of the *New Age*’.²⁸

One such reader was the prominent intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, who joined the thread in the 15 June issue to censure Kennedy’s (Verdad’s) ‘unwarranted’ and

23 Ibid., p. 389.

24 Ibid., p. 388. As context for Mahomed’s characterization of (Boer) women as ‘bloodthirsty’, Jock McCulloch reports that one petition calling for Alukuleta’s death was allegedly signed by 1,200 Rhodesian women, although McCulloch goes on to state that there were fewer than 6,000 white women in the territory at the time. McCulloch, p. 22.

25 S. Coetzee, ‘Mr. Verdad and South Africa’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 8.18 (2 March 1911), 427.

26 G. F. Riordan, ‘Mr. Verdad and South Africa’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 8.24 (13 April 1911), 571.

27 Patrick Collier and James J. Connolly, ‘Print Culture Histories Beyond the Metropolis: An Introduction’, in *Print Culture Histories Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. by James J. Connolly et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 3–25 (p. 5).

28 Gerald Cumberland, qtd in Robert Scholes, General Introduction to the *New Age*, Modernist Journals Project, modjourn.org.

‘insulting’ attack on black Americans.²⁹ A book Du Bois co-authored with Booker T. Washington — *The American Negro* — had been favorably reviewed by the *New Age* two years earlier.³⁰ Not only a distinguished scholar, he also entered the debate as a founding member of the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and founding editor, in 1910, of its organ, the *Crisis* magazine. Targeting a primary audience of educated African Americans, the *Crisis* aimed at once to document the achievements of the race and to chronicle racial discrimination, both nationally, and to a lesser extent, globally. The magazine’s support of the transnational Pan-African movement can be seen in its extensive coverage of the Universal Races Congress, which included Du Bois among its speakers (see Fig. 3). The congress aimed to shine a spotlight on racism worldwide, promote interracial understanding, and ‘establish a scientific basis for dealing with racial questions’.³¹ In 1911, then, in the space of a month, Du Bois crossed the Atlantic twice (once figuratively, once literally) to address racial discrimination and injustice in transnational forums. Du Bois described the Races Congress as an invaluable opportunity for speakers of different nationalities to meet as ‘men and equals in the center of the world’ — a striking phrase that speaks to the cultural capital of this metropolitan venue.³² Although its aims were very different, the *New Age* was another metropolitan venue that promised to provide, in the editor’s words, ‘some neutral ground where intelligences may meet on equal terms’.³³ In his letter to the *New Age*, Du Bois accuses the magazine of falling short of its mission, by allowing Verdad to ‘parade his ignorance in inexcusable, offensive language’, in a manner ‘beneath the dignity of a decent periodical’.³⁴ Du Bois thus highlights the periodical’s accountability to its readership and raises the issue of what discursive parameters should govern public sphere debates such as this.

On the one hand, even as Du Bois objected that the *New Age* had abandoned its apparently liberal ethos and a basic standard of civility, the very publication of his letter suggests that the column was indeed serving as a forum for transnational debate: not every periodical welcomed dissenting views from its readers. In Du Bois’s letter, he identified himself only as ‘a black American and a believer in the doctrines of Socialism’, but, as aforementioned, he also wielded the pen as editor of the *Crisis* and it is worth noting that he fulfilled one of that magazine’s editorial missions by acting as media watchdog. This was a consistent aim for Du Bois even before he founded the *Crisis*. In 1907, for instance, he sought to publish a response to a racist article in *McClure’s*, but the editors refused, stating that they did not want to ‘open our pages to controversy’.³⁵ The *New Age*, in contrast, revelled in controversy. The letters column enabled Du Bois to reach beyond the large, but in some ways like-minded audience of *Crisis* readers, to address an audience that included some hostile to the very premise of racial equality.

On the other hand, surely intelligences cannot meet on equal terms when one party denies the basic humanity of the other. In the column in question, Kennedy’s vitriolic insistence on the biological inferiority of people of colour functions as hate speech, shutting down possibilities for public discourse. With repugnant statements such as ‘our English writers on Democracy would do well to leave niggers out of the question when discussing the equality, even the theoretical equality before the law, of

29 W. E. Burghardt DuBois [sic], ‘The American Problem’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 9.7 (15 June 1911), 165.

30 Harold Rylett, ‘The American Negro’ (Books of the Week), *New Age*, 5.21 (16 September 1909), 382.

31 Qtd in Verdad [Kennedy], ‘Foreign Affairs’, *New Age*, 9.11 (15 June 1911), 147.

32 Qtd in Smith, *Emancipation without Equality*, p. 136.

33 Anonymous [A. R. Orage], ‘To our Readers’, *New Age*, 2.26 (25 April 1908), 503.

34 DuBois, ‘The American Problem’.

35 Qtd in Anne E. Carroll, ‘Protest and Affirmation: Composite Texts in the *Crisis*’, *American Literature*, 76.1 (2004), 89–116 (p. 111).

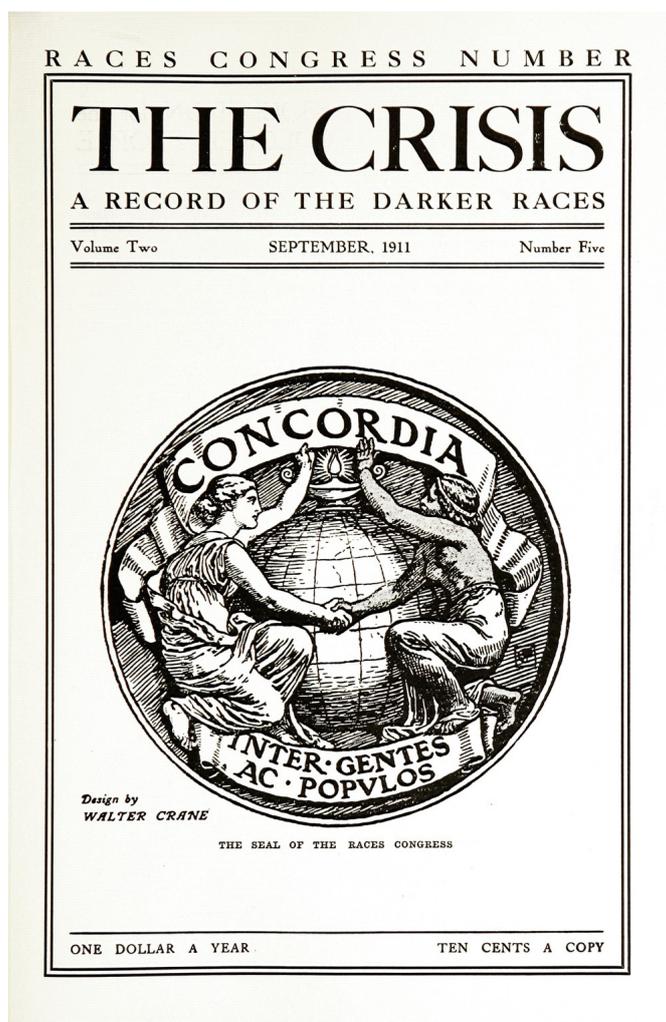


Fig. 3 Cover of the *Crisis*, Races Congress Number (September 1911)

the human race',³⁶ Kennedy was reinforcing a white supremacist ideology that worked to ban people of colour from participating in a democratic exchange of ideas. Kennedy's column became a kind of test case for free speech, and Du Bois was right to question whether the *New Age* was justified in providing a platform for such vitriol. 'Is this necessary?' he demands; 'Are there no gentlemen among the Fabian Socialists who can write? Is it necessary to be a blackguard in order to be brilliant, and does THE NEW AGE prefer this sort of thing to the truth? Does it propose to allow Mr. Verdad to continue this assault as he promises to do?'³⁷ With this volley of questions, Du Bois confronts the *New Age* for transgressing the boundaries of civility and implies that the magazine has an ethical responsibility to censure ignorant or incendiary speech.

The global scope of this debate sometimes necessitated a lag in response, but three months later, a reader from Australia named Grant Hervey³⁸ joined the fray to defend Kennedy's (Verdad's) combative style. In contrast to the common perception of periodicals as ephemeral, disposable objects, and in testament to the high esteem he

36 S. Verdad [J. M. Kennedy], 'Foreign Affairs', *New Age*, 8.7 (15 December 1910), 148.

37 DuBois, 'The American Problem'.

38 The table of contents spells his name 'Harvey' but the piece is signed 'Hervey'. I have not tracked down any other letters by this correspondent.

had for the journal, Hervey described carefully archiving past issues, ‘THE NEW AGE being one of those papers, and they are few, that one religiously preserves’.³⁹ Hervey’s archives included British periodicals from across the political spectrum, from the socialist *Clarion* to the conservative *National Review*, but he singled out the *New Age* for its commitment to promoting frank debate about contentious issues. Hervey considered Kennedy’s pugilistic style a valuable corrective to overly cautious and polite public discourse, which skirted around important issues: he argues that Kennedy’s writings ‘are valuable precisely in so far as they are plain, blunt, and even — if you like — offensive. It is only the writer and speaker who is offensive, i.e. who infuriates the other side, who is of any use.’⁴⁰ Hervey’s lauding of ‘offensive’ utterances starkly contrasts with Du Bois’s prizing of civility in public discourse. Is it necessary, Du Bois had asked, to be ‘deliberately insulting?’ Hervey answers, emphatically, ‘yes!’ It is precisely this capacity to offend that Hervey values in the *New Age*. Marshalling the offensive rhetoric that he celebrates, Hervey caricatures the mainstream press as platitudinous and sentimental:

Platitude-mongers and solemn slobberers of sickening sentimentality have in England a practical monopoly of the platform and the Press. THE NEW AGE itself is supremely useful simply as a medium of escape from this avalanche of Christian slobber. Its writers are always offending somebody, as is their vocational duty — hence the particular excellence of its correspondence columns.⁴¹

Hervey considers the *New Age*’s capacity to offend — to ‘infuriate the other side’ — as a great service to ‘its world-wide army of intelligent readers’.⁴²

Core contributor Beatrice Hastings definitely took it as her vocational duty to offend, infuriate, and provoke debate. As I have documented elsewhere, Hastings played a central role in choreographing controversy around feminist issues in the *New Age*, and her role in the black peril debate was no exception. Hailing from South Africa yet located in London, she positioned herself as an insider on the topic, needling correspondents from Africa. It was in the letters section that she fanned the flames of the debate in June 1912, writing on holiday to praise the magazine’s latest issue. Her segue into the topic is Du Bois’s letter, which, she notes, ‘interests’ her ‘exceedingly’; she goes on to generalize that despite extensive travel in Africa and the United States, she ‘cannot recall a single instance of rudeness, let alone insult from any coloured man or woman’, which makes her dubious of allegations of widespread black peril. This remark leads to her zinger: ‘The present epidemic in Africa of native crime is the result of the cry of the white woman for the blood of the Umtali native.’⁴³ Fulfilling her vocational duty to offend, Hastings broadens Dusé Mohamed’s earlier remark about Boer women to construe white South African women in general as instigators, not victims, of violence. The remark is clearly meant to throw gasoline on the fire of the peril debate.

Not all readers were as appreciative as Hervey of the combative style that Hastings and Hervey both employ, nor was there consensus that the capacity for offence was integral to the *New Age* brand. A reader from Johannesburg, T. A. R. Purchar, strongly condemns Hastings’s ‘imputations against our womenfolk’ — by which he means white South African women in general — fashioning Hastings as an uninformed outsider dangerously posing as one with ‘intimate knowledge’ of the distant colony — a

39 Grant Hervey, ‘The Iniquities (?) and Inaccuracies (?) of S. Verdad’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 9.22 (28 September 1911), 525–26 (p. 525).

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 526.

43 Beatrice Hastings, ‘En Amie’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 9.8 (22 June 1911), 191.

characterization Hastings would go on to dispute. Like Hervey, Purchar affirms that he is a longtime ‘admirer of the frank outspokenness of THE NEW AGE,’ and of the journal’s commitment to reporting ‘plain facts’, but Purchar’s tone is more moderate as he aims to correct the record on the black peril and to make the journal accountable to its overseas readers.⁴⁴ When ‘unkind’ and ‘uninformed’ ‘opinions are expressed upon the people of the overseas dominions by those who live in the homeland’, Purchar writes, he has no choice but to intervene: ‘That one woman should make such an uncalled for and sweeping charge against tens of thousands of women of her own race is a subject for regret and astonishment.’⁴⁵

Hastings’s incendiary remarks compel others from the global readership to address the woman question. William Marwick, a former civil servant in West Africa and Jamaica who professes ‘deep sympathy with the coloured races in all lands’, takes issue with the implication that the black peril is exaggerated or false.⁴⁶ As evidence, he quotes extensively from a speech from the Universal Races Congress by Irene Macfadyen, wife of a British civil servant and president of the Women’s Enfranchisement League in Cape Town. Macfadyen maintains that while ‘safe before’, white women are now in grave danger from natives corrupted by the white man’s example, and speaking for white South African women, she pledges that ‘we mean to throw our protection round every woman and child in the Union’.⁴⁷ Macfadyen is, in other words, as concerned with *white peril* as with *black peril* — and sees sexual violence and male vice more generally as a problem that cuts across races.⁴⁸ She sees the franchise (notably, of *white women*) as the solution. Macfadyen’s speech was widely covered in the suffrage press, thus, as with Du Bois’s voice, Macfadyen’s inclusion (by proxy) in this *New Age* debate represents an intersection of periodical communities.⁴⁹ Prominent suffragette and regular *Votes for Women* contributor Emily Wilding Davison echoes Macfadyen’s assessment two weeks later, forming another bridge between the suffrage press and the *New Age*.⁵⁰ Davison writes that the ‘Black Peril question is not a mere race question’ but ‘a sex question, and, as such, a world question’. She highlights the injustice of allowing white men who sexually violate black women to go ‘scot-free [...] whilst exacting a fierce penalty from the black’. The fundamental devaluation of women — who are ‘the white man’s goods and chattels’ — is at the root of sexual violence, and the franchise (again, for *white women*) is the answer.⁵¹ Both Macfadyen and Davison call attention to racial injustice, but reinscribe racial hierarchies by advocating for the enfranchisement of their own

44 T. A. R. Purchar, ‘The Black Peril in South Africa’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 9.16 (17 August 1911), 381.

45 Ibid.

46 William Marwick, ‘The Black Peril in South Africa’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 9.17 (24 August 1911), 405.

47 Qtd in *ibid.*

48 While Dusé Mohamed and Coetzee focus on Boer women, the feminist interlocutors in this thread — including Hastings, Macfadyen, and Davison — speak inclusively of white women, including British settlers.

49 See, for example, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, ‘The Outlook’, *Votes for Women*, 4.180 (18 August 1911), 741; Anonymous, ‘Woman and the Race’, *Votes for Women*, 4.178 (4 August 1911), 71; and M. L. MacKenzie, ‘The Universal Races Congress,’ *Woman’s Leader and the Common Cause*, 2.121 (3 August 1911), 303–04.

50 For more on the *New Age* dialogue with the suffrage press, see Carey Snyder, ‘Beatrice Hastings: Debating Suffrage in the *New Age* and *Votes for Women*’, in *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture in Britain, 1890s–1920s: The Modernist Period*, ed. by Faith Binckes and Carey Snyder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 242–57.

51 Emily Wilding Davison, ‘The Black Peril in South Africa’ (Correspondence), *New Age*, 9.20 (14 September 1911), 478.

race.⁵² By hitching the case for the women's franchise to a discussion of black peril in the *New Age*, these writers bring the concerns of the suffrage press to an ideologically diverse audience.

As a case study of the *New Age* magazine's global dialogics, the black peril thread reveals that readers from across the globe were eager to participate in transnational debates curated by a London magazine. The letters column invited readers from different political, geographical, and ideological backgrounds to engage in spirited, often contentious debate. Correspondents like Du Bois and Davison serve as reminders that such debates remained embedded in larger frameworks of racial and gender inequality. Nonetheless, the broad range of voices and viewpoints included in this debate suggests that the magazine filled an important niche within periodical networks, where different publics could sometimes 'meet on equal terms'.

Carey Snyder is Professor of English at Ohio University. She is co-editor, with Faith Binckes, of the EUP collection, *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture in Britain, 1890s-1920s: the Modernist Period* (2019), editor of the Broadview Press edition of H. G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (2015), and author of *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters: Ethnographic Modernism from Wells to Woolf* (2008). Her current research focuses on British modernism, periodical studies, and feminist print culture.

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52 The justice and/or prudence of enfranchising black African men in British territories was a topic concurrently debated in the *New Age*, sometimes also under the heading of 'black peril' — a conflation that shows how the moral panic surrounding alleged sexual violence by black males was symbolic for a perceived threat to the white body politic. See, for example, G. Derrick, 'The Black Peril in South Africa', *New Age*, 10.5 (30 November 1911), 116.

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