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Claire Parfait

Introduction

- 1 Joel Augustus Rogers, an African American journalist and self-taught historian born in Jamaica, produced an impressive number of articles in various papers and issued works such as *From 'Superman' to Man* (1917), *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro* (1934), *Sex and Race* (1941-1944) and *World's Great Men of Color* (1946-47), among others. He was very well-known in his day, then his name and works fell into oblivion. In 1975, historian W. Burghardt Turner listed Rogers among the "un-sung heroes of Afro-American historiography" (Turner W.B., 1975: 39). This is less true today, thanks to several scholarly articles by Thabiti Asukile and others, but mostly Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates's history blog on the online magazine *The Root* was entitled "A Hundred Amazing Facts about the Negro," after Rogers' book.¹ The last entry, "Amazing Fact about the Negro No. 100," presented Rogers as a popularizer of black history: "Which journalist was among the first to bring black-history facts to the masses?" (*The Root*, November 17, 2014). The blog has been discontinued but Gates published a book with the same title in 2017.
- 2 As a self-taught historian who sought to popularize black history, Rogers was largely ostracized from the American academic mainstream. This made it all the more difficult for him to find publishing venues and partly explains why, like many of his

predecessors and a few of his contemporaries, Rogers turned to self-publishing. After a brief overview of Rogers' career, I will examine his methodology and sources, and his use of collective biography in two of his early works of history, *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* (1931) and *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* (1935). These two collective biographies preceded the two-volume *World's Great Men of Color*, published in 1946 and 1947, for which he is better known today. However, even if my main focus is on the two 1930s collective biographies, I will say a word of his first work, *From 'Superman' to Man* (1917) for two reasons: it tells us the role Rogers ascribed to history and it was his first experience in self-publishing. Indeed, most of Rogers' works were self-published and this form of publication influenced Rogers' critical reception. The essay will demonstrate the ways in which Rogers inscribed himself in a long tradition of amateur black historians and how he differed from them.²

Joel Augustus Rogers, Life and Early Works

- 3 Rogers was born in 1880 in Jamaica. His father was a Methodist minister and a schoolteacher who, in order to support his eleven children, kept changing schools in the hope of earning better wages. He eventually became an overseer on a large plantation. Rogers tried but failed to get a scholarship to university (Asukile T., 2010: 323), and spent four years in the British Army before emigrating to the United States in 1906 (Rogers H., 1995: 7). Rogers' move is part of a larger trend: between 1900 and 1930 some 40,000 immigrants of African descent, mostly from the British colonies in the Caribbean, settled in Harlem (Watkins-Owens I., 1996: 1). For Rogers, the discovery of the peculiar brand of American racism was a shock. In the Jamaican racial hierarchy, Rogers, who was racially mixed and belonged to the middle class, ranked somewhere between blacks and whites. His father did not allow him to play with the black children on the plantation. This might explain why before he arrived in the United States, Rogers thought of himself in terms of class rather than race. In New York, he realized he was black (Rogers, H, 1995: 7).³
- 4 Rogers eventually settled in Chicago where he studied commercial art for 9 years before becoming aware that his being black prevented him from getting a job other than house painter (7). Meanwhile he supported himself by working as a Pullman porter, which allowed him to travel across the country, read a lot, and "see different kinds of people in many different kinds of moods," as he explained in a May 1924 interview in *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Rogers' experience was to serve as the basis for his first work, *From 'Superman' to Man*, which came out in 1917. *From 'Superman' to Man* is a conversation between a learned Pullman porter and a racist senator from Oklahoma. Over the course of the journey between Ohio and California, the porter systematically counters every racist argument of the senator, and not only succeeds in making him change his mind about race but also convinces him to take action to dismantle the racial prejudices of his contemporaries.
- 5 This first work by Rogers reveals that for him (as well as for his predecessors and contemporaries), racial prejudice was mainly due to ignorance. Whether in the 19th century or the early decades of the 20th century, the works of history penned by African Americans historians were meant to set the record straight as to their contributions to the nation; evidence of these contributions would produce a counternarrative aimed at promoting self-esteem in the black community and demonstrating to whites that

African Americans should enjoy full citizenship and equality.⁴ Rogers, too, believed in the power of history to change minds and fight African American feelings of inferiority as well as white racism. Indeed, *From 'Superman' to Man* provides scathing attacks of segregation and racial violence, while also encouraging racial intermarriage. The work includes passing references to prominent black men of the past and present, who would be the subjects of biographical sketches in Rogers' later works and can be considered as "international beacons of African-American memory," or "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory), as Michel Fabre has demonstrated (Fabre M., 1994: 122). Thus, for instance, Amo (who in the 18th century received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Wittenberg), Toussaint L'Ouverture, Ira Aldridge, the renowned 19th-century actor, and Blaise Diagne, who in 1914 was the first African to be elected to the French National Assembly. However, *From 'Superman' to Man* is a partly autobiographical essay more than a collective biography.

- 6 Rogers contacted several publishing houses, failed to interest any of them in his book, and had it printed at his own expense,⁵ thereby launching a long career as "a successful one-man commercial publishing firm," to use Donald Franklin Joyce's words (Joyce D.F., 1991: 187). The Chicago firm of M.A. Donohue & Co. printed two editions of the work, as well as Rogers' second book, *As Nature Leads* (1919), a sequel to *From 'Superman' to Man*. The company refused, however, to place their imprint on the first edition of *From 'Superman'* and on *As Nature Leads*. As Rogers explained to Arthur Schomburg, the publishers deemed the works too "raw."⁶ Rogers talked M.A. Donohue into putting their imprint on the second edition of *From 'Superman,'* which led to a flood of indignant letters from white readers. Unsurprisingly, the publishers refused to issue a third edition of the work. Rogers approached Open Court Publishing in Chicago for that third edition, but the proposal was turned down owing to what was deemed the incendiary quality of the work.⁷
- 7 Rogers does not seem to have bought any advertising space for the first edition of the work, which sold through word of mouth, at least according to him: "[...] my friends liked the book and did the pushing of it for me" (Rogers J.A., 1943a: 7). Whatever the case, the first edition of 1,000 copies sold out, as did the second, also of 1000 copies (French, S.H., 1940). Rogers did manage to issue a third edition, which received a glowing review in the *Chicago Defender*, a black paper, in December 1920. The review clearly stated that the work was to be bought from the author ("A Wonder Book," *The Chicago Defender*, 4 December 1920, p. 9).
- 8 In the early 1920s, Rogers moved to New York where he met the African American columnist and editor George Schuyler who was to become a life-long friend as well as a staunch supporter of his works. When Schuyler took over as editor of the *Messenger*—an African American periodical founded in 1917 by two socialists and civil rights activists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph—, he invited Rogers to contribute to the magazine. By then, Rogers was already writing for *The Negro World*, the organ of Marcus Garvey's UNIA. At around the same time, he also started writing for the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, both of which serialized a revised version of *From 'Superman' to Man* in 1923-24.
- 9 Rogers' name appeared very often in the African American press of the time, which carried his articles on diverse topics—from current events to Broadway plays, books and so on—reviewed his books and noted his comings and goings. He published several articles in the National Urban League's magazine *Opportunity* and had an essay on jazz

in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), the seminal anthology associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Rogers' articles mainly appeared in the black press, with a few notable exceptions, as for instance when his essay "The American Negro in Europe" was printed in May 1930 in the literary magazine edited by H. L. Mencken, *The American Mercury*. While it is obvious that he had become an eminent member of the African American community, Rogers continued to publish his works at his own expense. He accounted for this by the fact white publishers would not publish his books as they were, and he would not let them censor them ("J.A. Rogers to Tour South," 9 January 1926: 6). He promoted them by buying advertising space in a few black newspapers, and sold them from home, by mail and through regular lecture tours. He paid for their printing through the money he made as a contributor to various papers and the sale of the books themselves (French S.H., 1940).

Rogers and Collective Biography

- 10 Like many of his predecessors, Rogers relied on collective biography to demonstrate the worth of people of African origin. In *What is African American History?* historian Pero Dagbovie notes that "black biography is one of the oldest genres of black historical writing as well as a popular form of black intellectual history" (Dagbovie P., 2015: 41). African American literature specialist John Ernest has observed that within the biographical genre, "collective biographies have been a staple of African American publishing" (Ernest J., 2016). There have been collections of biographical sketches in African American history books since Robert Benjamin Lewis's 1836 *Light and Truth*. Those accumulations of examples allowed their authors to "highlight race achievements" (Des Jardins J., 2003: 127) and to "suggest alternative interpretations" to the mainstream narrative of American history, as Scott Casper writes (Casper S., 1999: 6). They were also meant to inspire pride in Africans Americans and provide role models. They were didactic, militant and usually addressed the problems of their times.
8
- 11 For Rogers, biography was "the highest and most civilizing form of literature" (Rogers J.A., 1972: 7). His interest in the lives of great men and women of African descent started early; at school in Jamaica he was taught that blacks were inferior, and that they had never accomplished anything of note. All the heroes he learned about were white. Reading books in the United States, he discovered the existence of prominent blacks and started collecting their names. The release of the movie *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 reinforced his desire to counter white prejudice and do so in a scientific manner, by accumulating evidence of the achievements of people of African descent (1-6).⁹ Rogers started publishing biographical sketches in the *Messenger* in 1924, at the request of George Schuyler. When the *Messenger* folded in 1928, Rogers continued to produce biographical sketches for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and other papers. He also wrote on all kinds of topics including his frequent trips abroad (France and England in 1925, Morocco, Egypt and Europe, especially Paris, from 1927 to 1931, Ethiopia in 1930, and so on). These trips, and visits to museums and libraries, provided Rogers with sources for his biographical portraits, as evidenced in the small notebooks in which he carefully recorded his findings.¹⁰
- 12 In 1931, Rogers gathered some twenty biographical sketches in *World's Greatest Men of African Descent*. In his foreword, he highlighted the role of the work: "Biography is of

the highest importance in that it gives us a sense of direction through life's wilderness as well as the courage to press on. To grow great, to bring out the best in ourselves a knowledge of the lives of the great is imperative" (Rogers J.A., 1931: i). Rogers more specifically targeted young readers of African descent but he noted that the work could also inspire broad-minded individuals of other races. A small volume of 79 pages, this collective biography is particularly striking because the sketches (of men only) do not include a single African American. While collective biographies penned by African Americans were always more or less inclusive in terms of gender and origin, this is the first example I have found in which African Americans are not represented at all. In the appendix to this edition, Rogers listed the biographies to be found in the future "completed edition of this work." The list includes such 19th and 20th-century African American luminaries as Nat Turner (who initiated a slave uprising in Virginia in 1831), Frederick Douglass, poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson ("leading interpreter of Negro spirituals," 78), educator Booker T. Washington, and Rogers' contemporary and fellow West Indian Arthur Schomburg (*ibid.*: 76-79). Yet, only 15 African Americans are listed against 50 "Native Africans" and 20 West Indians. The numerical inferiority of African Americans is striking.

- 13 Rogers has left few indications as to his choice of biographical sketches in *World's Greatest Men of African Descent*. It could be argued that he devoted little space to African Americans because there already was a rich tradition of African American collective biographies. Several such works were published in the first decades of the 20th century, by John E. Bruce, John W. Cromwell, Benjamin G. Brawley, and Hallie Q. Brown among others. With a few exceptions, such as Bruce's 1910 *Short Biographical Sketches of Eminent Negro Men and Women*, most of the collective biographies produced from the 1910s to the 1930s featured African American heroes. Several trips to Europe and Africa in the 1920s allowed Rogers to uncover many new facts about the history of people of African descent, as he explained to Floyd Calvin of the *Pittsburgh Courier* when he returned from Europe in 1931. These facts, according to Rogers, had been ignored or suppressed by whites in order to "keep the Nordic idea dominant" (quoted in Asukile T., 2010: 332). Rogers was perhaps intent on making his readers discover new or little-known figures of prominent Africans in Africa and Europe, thereby enlarging and enriching sites of memory for African Americans.
- 14 Another explanation can perhaps be found in an interview that he gave decades later, in which he hinted that centuries of slavery had bred subservience in African Americans. Noting that Reconstruction was followed by a period which "was at times worse than slavery," Rogers explained the success of immigrants like Andrew Carnegie by the fact that they did not start out with an inferiority complex, thus suggesting that this is what stopped African Americans from aiming higher. While Rogers acknowledged that "the history of the Negro in America is most remarkable," and underlined the key role black soldiers played in the American War of Independence and later the Civil War, he concluded that this "was far more for the benefit of the whites than for himself" (Rogers J.A., 1965).
- 15 Finally, before 1931, Rogers had published in various black papers biographical sketches of some of the characters that are to be found in his first collective biography. According to Rogers, these were so successful "that many requests came in asking for the sketches in book form (Rogers J.A. 1972: 9). Rogers' essay "The Negro in European history," printed in *Opportunity* dated June 1930, also already included some of the

characters whose lives he briefly explored in *World's Greatest Men of African Descent*, which might thus be seen as a "recycling" of sorts.

- 16 In his 1931 work of history, Rogers seems to have selected the subjects of his biographical sketches to highlight specific points he wanted to make. Some of the characters were most likely chosen because of the influence they exerted on the society of their times: thus, for instance, Pharaoh Akhenaton who fought superstitions and tried to impose monotheism,¹¹ or two Ethiopian kings of the 4th and 6th centuries who adopted Christianity. Some were picked because they symbolized a stunning rise from slave to sultan, king or emperor (such as Kafur, a slave from Sudan who eventually ruled Egypt in the 10th century); others because they managed to beat back Western armies at least for a time, as was the case of late 19th-century Ashanti king Prempeh; or again because of their fabulous wealth, for instance Tombut, an 18th-century king of Guinea. Rogers acknowledged that the subjects of his sketches were not necessarily pleasant men. Chaka, a powerful Zulu king was described as a despot, "not a pleasant figure to contemplate," (Rogers J.A., 1931: 28) and Kafur "was as ugly and fat as a walrus" (52). Rogers also provided a few sketches of men who were admired in Europe, such as George Bridgetower, a 19th-century musician, or the Chevalier de Saint George, who charmed the court of Versailles before the French Revolution. Also featured is "Alexander the Greatest," Alexandre Dumas father, the general who fought under Napoleon (41).¹² The only really recent example was that of Captain Mortenol who was in charge of the air defense of Paris during World War I. Since Mortenol's name is handwritten on the cover of Rogers' 1931 notebook, it is likely that he heard about him when he was in Paris and decided to investigate the case.
- 17 *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* includes numerous photographs, many of them taken by Rogers himself during his trips abroad, some in the museums he had visited. There is no recognizable order to the arrangement of the sketches which sometimes occupy several pages, sometimes are just long captions accompanying illustrations. As to sources, they were varied. Rogers quoted Egyptologists, both contemporary and 19th-century ones, the Koran, some classic works of history such as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and some older works, like that of 10th-century poet Al Muharabi. Rogers provided few dates or places of publication, and rarely gave page numbers. He evidently chose not to follow the rules of scholarly references, thus perhaps indicating that his primary target was not of the kind that might require or be interested in this kind of information; he was clearly addressing a general (black) reading public.
- 18 Like his other works, *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* was self-published. Rogers advertised the work in *The Negro World* and *The Pittsburgh Courier*. *The Negro World* gave the work not one but two glowing reviews; the first one, signed by the writer and critic Aubrey Bowser, ascribed to the book a black readership while also recommending it to anyone who wished to know the world "as it really is and has been for ages" (Bowser A., 1932: 8). The second review was unsigned and presented Rogers as "This Little David of Negro literature." The commentator waxed lyrical and spoke of "a startling revelation," "a titanic inspiration," before concluding that no library was complete without it: "It tells you where you came from. It suggests where you should be going." ("World's Greatest Men," 2 April 1932: 5). Other black papers praised the work, which was priced at \$1 a copy and sold by the author himself. ¹³After the book came out, Rogers undertook a series of lectures in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Illinois and other states, which were so many opportunities to sell copies (Calvin, F.J., 2 April 1932, 3).

- 19 The title page of *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* bears the mention "advance edition" and Rogers explained in the foreword that he intended to bring out a more complete version as soon as he had gathered enough money to do so, from the sale of this book and from other sources. He invited readers to send in \$10 in exchange for a "specially bound autograph copy" of the new work; as an added incentive, the names of the sponsors would appear in the edition.¹⁴ Rogers went back to Europe in 1932, spent a few months in Paris doing research work for the new work, before returning to the United States in January 1933. The 2,000 copies of the book had not yet sold out (French S.H., 1940), and Schuyler told the readers of the *Pittsburgh Courier* that there was no better way of spending a dollar than to buy Rogers' book: "It is one of those books that would intellectually emancipate the Negro, if he would read it" (Schuyler, 1933: 10).¹⁵
- 20 In spite of Rogers' ambitious plans for his second work of collective biography, when *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* finally came out in 1935 (in-between, Rogers had published *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro*), it was very similar to *World's Great Men of African Descent*. The new work was 71-page long and recycled most of the sketches of the first edition, adding some information here and there, as well as a couple of new sketches (Imhotep for ancient Egypt, for instance). Because the title now mentioned women, Rogers included a sketch of Queen Zingha who in the 16th century defended her kingdom from the Portuguese, and whose portrait graced the front cover. As in the 1931 edition, no African American was featured in the work. This definitely was not the completed edition announced by Rogers in 1931. The title page of *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* bears the mention "small edition," and Rogers again announced a later edition, for which he provided a very detailed table of contents. Again, it would comprise fewer African Americans than West Indians and Africans. It was to be called "large edition," and would cost \$10 (Rogers J.A., 1935: 68-71).
- 21 Perhaps because this edition was not fundamentally different from the first one, and a revised edition more than a new work, Rogers did not buy advertising space for it. By contrast, his *100 Amazing facts* and *Key to 100 Amazing Facts*, which provided the sources for the amazing facts, were heavily promoted in 1934 and 1935. *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* was merely listed among the works Rogers advertised when he returned from Ethiopia where he had covered the war for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. His numerous articles on the war had made him truly famous; in addition, since 1934, Rogers had a regular column in the paper, entitled "Your History," subtitled "Your history dates back beyond the cotton fields of the South; back thousands of years before Christ." This illustrated column acquainted the contemporary readers with all kinds of celebrities from the African diaspora in all kinds of fields and at all times. Rogers, who was himself a celebrity by then, probably deemed that the time was right to remind readers of his productions. Entitled "Know Your Race! Knowledge is Power," the ad listed several works by Rogers, *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* ("Your boy, your girl, yourself, need the inspiration in this great book"), *100 Amazing Facts About the Negro*, *The Key to 100 Amazing Facts*, and finally *The Real Facts About Ethiopia*, a 50-page booklet published in 1936 (*Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 June 1936: A10).
- 22 *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* did not get any reviews, again probably because it was too similar to the 1931 collective biography and thus appeared to be a second edition rather than a new book. Only Schuyler mentioned it in his "Views and Reviews" column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, stressing the low price of the work—only a

dollar— and concluding that “along with the Bible, the dreambook and the numbers chart, *Fit* should be in every Negro home” (Schuyler G., 1935: 10).

- 23 Indeed, Rogers’ works, which were only reviewed in the African American press, were cheap, but the collective biographies came out during the Great Depression which, as we know, hit African Americans especially hard. Yet his works did sell, especially his great hit of the 1930s, *100 Amazing Facts*, which had 18 editions between 1934 and 1940 (French S. H., 1940). As for *World’s Greatest Men and Women of African Descent*, its 3,000 copies were sold out by 1938 (Rogers J.A., 1972: 9). It would take Rogers another decade before he could publish the two volumes of *World’s Great Men of Color* (1946 and 1947) which cover the African diasporas over the world and include women as well as men. In-between he wrote the 3 volumes of *Sex and Race* (published in 1941, 1942, 1944 respectively), and among others, contributed his “Your History” column in the *Pittsburgh Courier* which most likely reached more readers than his books. The history column, the two works of collective biography issued in the 1930s can thus be considered as trial runs for *World’s Great Men of Color*.

Self-publishing

- 24 Like many of his predecessors, such as William Wells Brown or George Washington Williams, to name just two 19th-century amateur historians, Rogers was a self-taught historian. However, by the time he started writing works of history, history had become professionalized, with the creation of the American Historical Association in the 1880s but more specifically the move toward “scientific” history, represented by historians like W.E.B. Du Bois, who had studied in Germany, or Carter G. Woodson. Being a historian trained in the discipline did not mean, however, that getting works published was any easier for black historians. Du Bois is an exception in that regard (Parfait, 2009). To provide African American scholars with publication venues, Carter Woodson launched the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916 and two publishing houses, including Associated Publishers in 1921. Unfortunately for Rogers, the journal and the houses only published trained historians (Turner W.B., 1971: D23), not “historians without portfolio” as Earl Thorpe called Rogers, Schomburg and a few others (Thorpe E.E., 1971: 151). What could be termed a hierarchy in legitimacy certainly helps explain why Rogers published his works at his own expense.
- 25 By doing so, Rogers followed in the footsteps of many of his predecessors (Parfait, 2014). In his *Sociology of Culture*, Raymond Williams analyzes the various kinds of relationships between artists and their markets and uses the word “artisanal” to describe the situation in which an independent producer “offers his own work for direct sale.” The producer thus controls every step of the work (Williams R., 1995: 44-45). Leon Jackson has shown how this artisanal mode of production was used by 19th-century authors, including slave poet George Moses Horton (Jackson L., 2008: 84). In his *Textes fugitifs*, Michaël Roy explores the various modes of production of a number of antebellum slave narratives, some of which were self-published and often sold by their authors themselves (Roy M., 2017). In many cases, well into the 20th century, this mode of production was not really a choice. According to Rogers, self-publishing was the only option for African American writers, as there were no black publishers and white publishers thought there was no public for books on the achievements of African Americans (Rogers J.A., 1961: 17).¹⁶ Indeed, for *World’s Greatest Men and Women of African*

Descent, Rogers approached a leading New York publisher, who praised it but said there was no market for that sort of literature.¹⁷ A few African American historians, such as Benjamin Brawley or W.E.B. Du Bois, managed to break into the mainstream book trade or to have their works published by university presses. Most of them, however, had to rely on the publishing houses created by Woodson or to bring out their works at their own expense. Thus, Cheryl Knott has uncovered the publishing history of Merl R. Eppse's 1938 textbook *The Negro, Too, in American History*, and shown that Eppse "cobbled together a hybrid form of book production combining self-publishing with a more sophisticated and ambitious distribution program than self-publishing usually involves" (Knott C., 2017: 40). While Rogers was right to emphasize the obstacles African American authors faced when trying to break into print, it can also be argued that he chose self-publication because he refused to have his works tampered with or censored in any way. This was already the case at the start of his career, as he explained in a 1926 interview: "I have had to publish all my books," said Rogers. "Either that or let the white publishers cut out the parts they don't like, which, of course, are usually the most telling parts." ("J.A. Rogers to Tour South," 9 January 1926: 6).

- 26 While Rogers advised aspiring writers to follow in his footsteps, he also warned them that they would not get rich, as the title of a 1953 article makes clear, "Rogers Says: Writers Must Not Be Motivated by a Desire for Riches or Fame" (Rogers J.A., 1943b: 7). In the same article, Rogers admitted that he was perpetually indebted to his printers but still managed to bring out new books: "My books are now selling, almost with no effort on my part, which brings in enough to keep the printers satisfied, and to get out anything I have on further credit."¹⁸ As a matter of fact, Rogers did expend a lot of energy to sell his books, advertised as much as he could afford to and travelled extensively to dispose of copies.¹⁹

Rogers' Audience

- 27 Rogers' audience was most likely largely made up of the readers of his syndicated history columns which, according to W. Paul Coates, "appeared in Black newspapers across America and were read by hundreds of thousands of Blacks" (Coates W.P., 1983). In the nineteenth century, many African Americans had resorted to newspapers to publish their writings and the black press had a long tradition of race vindication. The decade in which Rogers published his two first collective biographies was a period of rapid growth for African American papers, whose number increased from about 150 in 1933, with a circulation of around 600,000, to 210 by 1940, with a circulation of almost 1.3 million (Washburn P., 2006: 140). The newspapers in which Rogers' articles appeared were among those with the largest circulation in the 1930s, at a time when the rate of illiteracy among African Americans had considerably diminished: literacy rose from about 5 percent in antebellum America to 30 percent in 1880 and 77 percent in 1920 (Danky J., 2009: 342). The *Pittsburgh Courier* had a circulation of about 150,000 in the mid-1930s (Appiah & Gates, 2005: 399) and enjoyed a national distribution. In 1940, Rogers' illustrated "Your History" columns were gathered into a book which The *Pittsburgh Courier* offered free of charge to all new subscribers; the editors of the *Courier* believed that the publication would "bring increased interracial understanding and tolerance," and do much "to infuse colored people, young and old, with a spirit of pride" (Rogers J.A., 1940: Foreword). The illustrated vignettes presented readers with a

bewildering array of past and present luminaries of African descent, in North and South America, the West Indies, Africa, Europe and Asia, with some additional pieces of information, such as the origin of the word slave for instance.

- 28 Through his history columns and his books, Rogers sought to popularize black history. He described his African American audience in various and often contradictory ways. Thus, he once noted, "This, you may set down as a positive fact: Negroes will buy books—and buy them eagerly too—if you have what they want in them—especially things they want said, things white publishers are afraid to print, lest they hurt both their friends and their enemies" (Rogers J.A., 1943a: 7); but he also lamented that it was difficult to get African Americans to take an interest in the topic of his works: "Negroes, as a whole, are still rather apathetic about literature on themselves" (Rogers J.A., 1954: 9).
- 29 As a matter of fact, the correspondence held in the Rogers Papers at Fisk University reveals a diverse audience; thus a (presumably white) teacher in a white high school in Texas wrote Rogers in 1934 to order three copies of *100 Amazing Facts*: she would use one in a sociology class, give another to the head of the black school and the third one to a "Colored friend." More surprising, Theodore G. Bilbo, then United States Senator from Mississippi, and a staunch advocate of white supremacy, wrote Rogers at some point in the 1930s, saying he had been shown a copy of *World's Greatest Men of African Descent*, and wanted to know whether the completed work announced by the author was out yet.²⁰ Letters from African American readers tell us how "ordinary" readers reacted to Rogers' works; to quote just one example, a California correspondent told Rogers, "Your writings give me a tremendous uplift."²¹ This was exactly what Rogers set out to do, as this excerpt from a 1961 article shows:

That is what the Negro needs today—literature that gives him a lift—the kind that smashes the old lies against him. I am quite sure that with the rise of the dark people of Africa and the New World, a fortune awaits those enterprising enough to give them this. Alone, unsupported, without capital, my books, which try to do this, have been going since 1917, to the extent that a big New York firm gives me credit without security.

(Rogers J.A., 1961: 17)

Conclusion

- 30 Rogers was doubly marginalized; as an autodidact, he was at the margins of the academic community, at a time when history had become professionalized. Because he published most of his works at his own expense, he was located outside the regular book trade and could not take advantage of its networks for the promotion and distribution of his books. Self-publication also has an impact on critical reception. Rogers was fully aware of this and admitted that self-published books were "looked down upon," but brushed the objection aside, arguing that "the independent soul will not care what others think," and that some of the world's greatest books had failed to find a publisher (Rogers J.A., 1943a: 7). Todd Vogel has rightly observed that "The difficulty black writers faced in getting published made them work creatively to broadcast their ideas in a variety of mediums" (Vogel T., 2001: 4). Rogers is a case in point. His main object was to popularize black history, and this he did achieve, by his books and perhaps more notably by his history columns, especially in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. They allowed him to bring many little known and unknown facts to a vast

audience. Rogers' ceaseless search for any piece of information that might be used to show the achievements of men and women of African descent and the fact he brought these facts to a wide public demonstrates a creative use of the margin he was placed in by his position as an African American and an untrained historian.

- 31 The critical reception of Rogers' works was mixed, and Rogers himself was rather bitter about it. In 1943, he complained that, "So far none of the big white critics or authors, with the exception of H.L. Mencken, has ever noticed me. And that goes for nearly all the big Negroes too" (Rogers J.A., 1943: 7). Theodore Vincent notes the opposition between two groups who pursued a common goal, namely to explore and make known African and African American history. The first group was composed of academics around Carter Woodson, Benjamin Brawley and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History; they taught in black colleges and received grants from white philanthropists; their works appeared in the *Journal of Negro History* and under the imprint of Associated Publishers. The second group formed around the Negro Society for Historical Research, founded in 1911 by Arthur Schomburg and John E. Bruce; they published in Marcus Garvey's papers; this circle included Rogers and a few others, who "found themselves ostracized from the American academic mainstream" (Vincent T.G., 1973: 337). Academics on one side, self-taught historians on the other. This divide is reflected in the articles summarizing Rogers' career after he died in 1966. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reminded its readers that without support of any kind, Rogers popularized black history through his "Your History" column in the paper as well as his works ("Nation Mourns," 9 April 1966: 1A and 11A). *The Crisis* described Rogers as "one of the great popularizers of Negro history," a man who always insisted that he wrote for "the man-in-the-street" (Joel Augustus Rogers, April 1966: 201). But according to the commentator, Rogers was criticized for his "often careless handling of his sources and authorities." The title of *Jet* magazine's article says it all: "Scholars Mourn Rogers' Death: Split on Works" ("Scholars Mourn," 14 April 1966: 26-27).

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Unsigned article, "World's Greatest Men of African Descent," *Negro World*, 2 April 1932, p. 5.

Unsigned article, "Young Novelist Tells how Pullman Porters Profit during Leisure Moments," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 May 1924, p. 3.

NOTES

1. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/category/history/100-amazing-facts/> last accessed 9 July 2020.
2. I would like to express my thanks to the joint research unit CNRS-LARCA (Université de Paris), where I was welcomed as an associate researcher in 2018-19. This allowed me to carry out the research work for this essay.
3. In his biography of African American John Edward Bruce, another journalist and self-taught historian, William Soraile notes that Bruce hated West Indians, whom he saw as traitors to their race because they resented being lumped together with African Americans that they felt superior to. Rogers was a case in point: a man who thought himself white until he set foot in the United States and who then presumed to talk of racism which he himself had not experienced. Soraile observes that this feeling was shared by many African Americans, who were not familiar with the importance of social class and the multiple racial hierarchies of the Caribbean (Soraile, W.: 2010, 147-48).
4. See Parfait *et al.*, 2017: 1-10.
5. "I had written a book, 'From Superman to Man,' which I felt was good and necessary (of course, all authors feel that way), and when the publishers refused it on a royalty basis, and others asked so much to print and market it, I merely took it to a printer, had an estimate on it, saved up enough money, and set him to work on it" (Rogers, J. A., 1943a: 7).
6. J.A. Rogers to Arthur Schomburg, January 12, 1919. Reel 5, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.
7. *Ibid.*
8. For a discussion of the evolution and current status of the biographical genre in historical writing, see "AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography," in *The American Historical Review* Vol. 114, No. 3 (June) 2009: 573-661.
9. D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman*, was blatantly racist and is said to have inspired the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. It aroused strong protest, notably from the NAACP (see Leon F. Litwack in Carnes, Mark C., 1995: 136-141).
10. The Rogers Papers at Fisk University include an impressive number of these notebooks.
11. Rogers wrote during a wave of Egyptomania, in the wake of Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun in 1922. The new wave of Egyptomania was reflected in architecture, fashion, and design. Rogers had visited Egypt in 1928: see Helga Rogers, biographical note, dated 1995, in J.A. Rogers, *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro with Complete Proof* (first edition 1934), Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2014, p. 8.
12. This is unusual: while Dumas features in many 19th-century collective biographies, authors usually refer to the writer, not the general, with the exception of Robert Benjamin Lewis who mentions both the father and the son (Benjamin, 1844: 304). See <https://archive.org/details/lighttruth00lewi/page/304>
13. Ad by J.A. Rogers, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 January 1932, p. 5.

14. Lists of subscribers often appeared in works issued by subscription: see Winship, M., 2018.
15. Schuyler gives the address where Rogers can be reached and stresses the fact that the work is the result of years of research in Europe, England and America. He concludes, "After a man has gone to so much trouble to dig up our glorious past, we should at least be sufficiently interested to read about it."
16. There were in fact African American publishers at the time, but the list compiled by Randall K. Burkett reveals that in the 1920s and 1930s, they were often the organs of religious denominations or specific associations: see <https://networks.h-net.org/node/2606/discussions/171291/african-american-book-publishers-list> (last accessed July 8, 2020).
17. "Some years ago I sent my 'World's Great Men & Women of African Descent' to a leading New York firm on the urging of a powerful friend of the firm. The book showed Negroes as rulers of white kingdoms, generals of white armies, saints, religious leaders, *etc.* The firm gave great consideration to it and praised it highly, but sent it back saying they couldn't handle it as there was no market for that sort of literature. I saw the justice of the firm's stand. The book wouldn't sell to its white clientele because the people in it were not clowns, or victims, or criminals, or the kind of Negroes it was accustomed to reading about, but were figures whose achievements would be denounced as so-called social equality" ("Rogers Says," 1 December 1945: 7).
18. In his correspondence, Rogers occasionally alludes to financial problems: "I have had enormous trouble over the years paying my printer": Joel A. Rogers to "Dear Mr. Davis," 30 April 1965, Joel Augustus Rogers Papers, Correspondence, General, 1964-5, Folder 7, Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.
19. Appiah and Gates note that Rogers was more widely read than Du Bois or Woodson, because his books could be found in barbershops and other "popular places" (Appiah A. and Gates, L.H., 2005: 602-3).
20. Letter dated Dec. 9, 1934, from a Miss Georgia Crosthwaite, 209 So. Walnut St, Weatherford, Texas, to J.A. Rogers Publications, 2293 7th Ave., Correspondence, General, 1930-1942, folder 2; J.A. Rogers Papers, Fisk University. The correspondent writes that she is also the librarian of the town's senior high school; Theodore G. Bilbo, United States Senate to Mr JA R 2293 Seventh Ave, NYC, undated letter; Correspondence, General, 1930-1942, J.A. Rogers Papers, Fisk University.
21. Letter from Ronald B Johnson LA, Ca 16 Oct. 1964, Folder 7: Correspondence, General, 1964-65. Letters come from all parts of the United States, and some from Africa (Nigeria, Liberia).

ABSTRACTS

Joel Augustus Rogers, an African American journalist and self-taught historian born in Jamaica, produced an impressive number of articles in various papers as well as several books. After he died in 1966, his name and works fell into oblivion, which explains why in 1975, historian W. Burghardt Turner listed Rogers among the "un-sung heroes of Afro-American historiography." Thanks to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and a handful of other scholars, Rogers has been "rediscovered" over the past decade.

As a self-taught historian who sought to popularize black history, Rogers was largely ostracized from the American academic mainstream. This made it all the more difficult for him to find publishing venues and partly explains why, like many of his predecessors and a few of his contemporaries, Rogers turned to self-publishing. After a brief overview of Rogers' career, I will examine his methodology and sources, and his use of collective biography in two of his early

works of history, *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* (1931) and *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* (1935). The essay will demonstrate the ways in which Rogers inscribed himself in a long tradition of amateur black historians and how he differed from them.

Joel Augustus Rogers est un journaliste et historien autodidacte noir américain né en Jamaïque. Auteur d'un grand nombre d'articles ainsi que de plusieurs ouvrages, il est tombé dans l'oubli après sa mort en 1966. En 1975, l'historien W. Burghardt Turner le comptait au nombre des « héros méconnus de l'historiographie afro-américaine ». On doit sa « redécouverte » aux travaux récents de Henry Louis Gates, Jr. et de quelques autres.

Sa formation d'autodidacte et son projet d'écrire une histoire susceptible de toucher un lectorat noir de masse ont placé Rogers à la marge de la communauté universitaire afro-américaine. De ce fait, comme bon nombre de ses prédécesseurs et quelques-uns de ses contemporains, Rogers a dû avoir recours à la publication à compte d'auteur. Après un bref aperçu de la carrière de Rogers, j'analyserai sa méthodologie, ses sources et le choix des sujets des portraits biographiques qui illustrent deux de ses premiers ouvrages historiques, *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* (1931) et *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* (1935). L'objectif est de montrer ce qui rattache Rogers à une longue tradition d'historiens amateurs et ce qui l'en distingue.

Joel Augustus Rogers foi um jornalista e historiador amador afro-americano nascido na Jamaica. Autor de numerosos artigos e de diversas obras, ele foi bastante conhecido em seu tempo antes de cair no esquecimento depois de sua morte em 1966. Assim, em 1975, o historiador W. Burghardt Turner o classificou dentre os « heróis desconhecidos da historiografia afro-americana ». Rogers foi recentemente redescoberto graças aos esforços de Henry Louis Gates, Jr., dentre outros pesquisadores.

Sua posição de autodidata e seu desejo de escrever uma história susceptível de alcançar um público leitor negro de massa colocaram-no à margem da comunidade universitária afro-americana. Isso explica por quê, assim como boa parte dos seus predecessores e alguns de seus contemporâneos, Rogers foi obrigado a publicar por sua conta. Neste artigo, após uma breve síntese sobre a carreira de Rogers, analisarei sua metodologia, suas fontes, e sua escolha bastante particular por trajetórias biográficas que marca duas de suas primeiras obras históricas, *World's Greatest Men of African Descent*(1931) e *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent*(1935). O artigo pretende mostrar em que medida Rogers se insere numa longa tradição de historiadores negros amadores e de que forma ele se destaca.

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