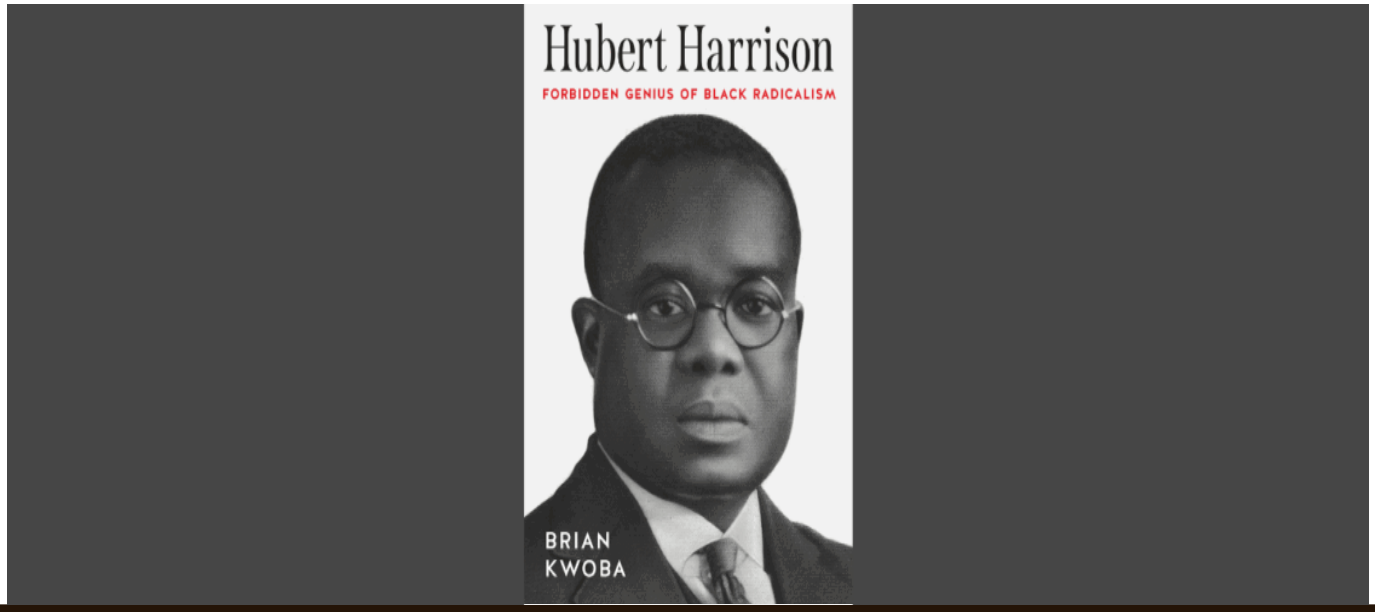

Brian Kwoba on his new book, Hubert Harrison

Posted on August 30, 2025 by Andrea Ringer

Brian Kwoba's Hubert Harrison: Forbidden Genius of Black Radicalism *offers an intellectual history of Harrison's race-first labor activism and community organizing. Dr. Kwoba organizes the book around Harrison's intellectual contributions to touchstone moments in the early twentieth century—including World War I, Marcus Garvey's movement, and free love politics. Harrison thought deeply about labor, socialism, and the role of the working class in his prolific writings and speeches, which are central in the book. Andrea Ringer interviewed Dr. Kwoba about his book.*

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Hubert Harrison: Forbidden Genius of Black Radicalism (2025)

You say that Harrison practiced “kaleidoscopic radicalism” and also race-first organizing. How can this intellectual history inform labor historians about early twentieth century movements?

One of the most impactful ways that my book on Hubert Harrison can inform labor historians about early twentieth century movements is by exposing more of them to each other. Harrison, a Caribbean immigrant from St. Croix, became a leading Black figure in movements for labor unions, free speech, freethought, free love, socialism, Black nationalism, colored internationalism, and pan-African liberation. Because he integrated all of these political radicalisms, he offers those familiar with any one (or none) of these formulations an opportunity to rethink the relationship between them, in ways that reopen new pathways to the emancipation of labor.

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On the one hand, the most relevant historiographies—of Black Marxism, Black freethinkers, Garveyism, Black sexual liberation, and the New Negro "Renaissance"—have either marginalized or omitted Harrison entirely. Yet he played a groundbreaking role in the crystallization of each of them.

As a result, recovering Harrison's legacy requires us to reexamine the history of Black people in relation to the Socialists, Wobblies, and Communists of the Jim Crow era; recover a forgotten strand of Black class-conscious, anti-imperialist, "colored" internationalism; reframe the intellectual history of the Black educational and public spheres in light of Harlem's "Outdoor University"; rethink the genealogy of the Black secular and freethought traditions; reappraise the origins and pitfalls of the global Garvey movement; reinterrogate the mythology of the "Harlem Renaissance"; and excavate an onyx crystalline layer in the geology of free love politics.

As one of the greatest minds to emerge from the stocks of working people, Harrison makes us reconsider early twentieth century labor organizing. He was born to dark-skinned plantation workers on the Caribbean island of St. Croix, and remained in the ranks of the working class for his whole life, and proudly so.

The famous New York City–born evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould once said that he was "less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein's brain than in the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops." Harrison was precisely such a mind. But due to his working class background and fearless radicalism, the full scope of his visionary legacy has been erased from popular memory. Until now. This suggests two things. First, that we have to reconsider the extent to which early twentieth century labor organizing produced some of the finest minds, ideas, and visionary possibilities that the world has ever seen. Second, that the US ruling class has extraordinary power to erase from history even the most shining such examples that emerge, as in the case of Hubert Henry Harrison. In this way, my book invites us to expand the horizons of the very meaning of labor history.

> Harrison developed a Black, working-class, and liberatory model of education that stood in stark contrast to both the industrial education model of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute and W.E.B. Du Bois' insistence on leadership by a "talented tenth" of the race,

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One of my favorite parts of this book is the way that you weave Harrison's ideas into the ideas of other radicals and other intellectuals. You point to dozens of better-known folks who were connected to Harrison's work. How does this proverbial cast of characters help us understand Harrison's relationship to organized labor?

My book locates Harrison in the context in which he lived. As a result the stories in the book had to include the insights of figures and forces like: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Eugene Debs, Upton Sinclair, Hellen Keller, VI Lenin, "Big" Bill Haywood, Leon Trotsky, Ben Fletcher, Alexandra Kollontai, Emma Goldman, Langston Hughes, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Grace P. Campbell, Williana Burroughs, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W.E.B. Du Bois, Victoria Woodhull, Mark Twain, and so many more. Integrating an array of figures allows me to tell stories of Harrison that touch on a wide variety of topics: arts & culture, sex & religion, science & technology, labor & love.

The 1913 Paterson Silk Strike seemed to have a lasting impact on Harrison's radicalism. Could you talk about the lessons that Harrison drew from that strike?

During the silk strike, Harrison supported the tactic of industrial sabotage— that is, workers deliberately undermining the efficiency of production, including destruction of the means of production—as a weapon in the class struggle. IWW leader Frederick Sumner Boyd had been arrested and convicted for advising the silk workers to sabotage production if the mill owners refused to meet their demands for better wages and working conditions. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote an entire pamphlet on sabotage to clarify its utility, morality, and legality, as Boyd's case was the first time anyone had been arrested for advocating sabotage. In defense of Boyd, Harrison defended sabotage, arguing that, as workers, "it is our one great weapon" and is "feared by capitalists more than anything else." Therefore, if the Paterson silk mill owners "want[ed] to lose $200,000" by not accepting the workers' demands, then "let them go ahead" and see what consequences would follow.

The Paterson Evening News found Harrison's statements "unfit to print," to which Elizabeth Gurley Flynn replied, "He tells plain facts and the bosses don't like them." Even the Socialist Party's New York Call, which he had criticized for refusing to print a letter from a prominent speaker at the IWW's Paterson Defense Conference,

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praised one of Harrison's speeches, reporting that "he filled in the remarks of the [other] speakers as the ocean does a chain of islands." Harrison became a major asset to the workers' movement, but his passion for industrial sabotage, mass strikes, and industry-wide organizing at the point of production proved irksome not only to the capitalist press but also to the moderate and gradualist Socialist Party leaders, with whom he would break over their anti-Black racism.

As someone who teaches at a land-grant HBCU, I was struck by your chapter on the outdoor university. Harrison truly worked to democratize knowledge by delivering information on his soapbox in Harlem (105). He also was very critical of the government's underfunding of Black public schools (18). These conversations seem so contemporary and relevant. I was immediately reminded of HillmanTok and also the ongoing underfunding of HBCUs. What can Harrison teach us about these conversations today?

Harrison pioneered what many Harlem residents called the "Outdoor University," which saw him teaching atop a stepladder on the corner of 135th and Lenox. His range of subjects covered labor history, the experience of African Americans during Reconstruction, the global geopolitics of World War I, the racism of eugenics, the Russian and Haitian revolutions, the origin of our sex ideals, the achievements of ancient African civilizations, the artistic works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Angelina Grimke, the philosophy of Karl Marx, the dangers of capitalist domination of science, and a thousand other topics. Harrison's educational praxis drew on the influence of the Socialist Party's Rand School of Social Science, the anarchist Modern School Movement, and also the tradition of the west African *griot* or storyteller/wisdom-keeper/poet/orator. A. Philip Randolph, labor organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, called this Outdoor University "one of the great intellectual forums of America." In other words, Harrison developed a Black, working-class, and liberatory model of education that stood in stark contrast to both the industrial education model of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute and W.E.B. Du Bois' insistence on leadership by a "talented tenth" of the race, preferably trained in the liberal arts tradition of a place like Harvard University.

Did you encounter any sources that were especially illuminating?

The single most generative source that I encountered was a small leaflet advertising Harrison's "Six Lectures on Sex" in 1917.

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This document marks Harrison's role as the first Black figure in US history to denounce Church and state repression of sexuality and give a public facing lecture series on sex education and call for decriminalizing access to contraception and defend "free love" on the grounds that humans are not sexual monogamists by nature!

And this was during the Jim Crow era, when white society cast Black women as hypersexual Jezebels or desexualized Mammys, and Black men as 'brutes' who were inherently threatening to the 'purity' of white women (and the masculinity of white men). This latter trope justified the lynching of Black men roughly twice a week in Harrison's day, a grisly act of mob murder that often included castration.

Harrison developed a Black free love politics in direct defiance of the potentially fatal risks involved. His example reveals how so many of the traumas, trials, and tribulations we grapple with in our sexual and romantic lives have larger structural causes, including the oppression of sexual freedom by compulsory monogamy ideology as a mechanism for preserving the private property and private-family ideology of the ruling class.

Harrison's analysis also suggests a way out: namely, that the struggle for a love that is radical, healing, and as limitless as Blackness itself is part and parcel of the struggle for Black liberation, women's liberation, spiritual decolonization, and the emancipation of labor and love from capitalism.

Building from that idea, what recent labor histories should be in conversation with your book?

I think one obvious example would be Blair L.M. Kelley's *Black Folk: The Roots of the Black Working Class*. Hubert Harrison was born to dark-skinned plantation workers on the island of St. Croix. He worked odd jobs as a Black Caribbean immigrant in Harlem. Thanks to his genius-level intellect, he managed to secure employment as a postal worker. In that job, Harrison chafed under the twelve-hour days, six-to-seven-day workweeks, poor ventilation, and abusive managers. He also witnessed the competition between the pro-management United National Association of Post Office Clerks (Local No. 1) and the pro-worker National Federation of Post Office Clerks (Local No. 10), which was affiliated with the AFL.

After writing an op-ed piece that criticized the racial accommodationism of Booker T. Washington, one of Washington's lieutenants in the Repubilcan Party got Harrison

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fired from his postal job. This set Harrison down a path where he would become a leading Black figure in the Socialist Party, alongside the illustrious W.E.B Du Bois. Harlem had become a “Mecca” for the migrants from the Jim Crow south and the Caribbean alike. After Harrison left the party, he founded the Liberty League of Negro Americans in 1917 at a meeting of 2,000 people at the Bethel AME Church in Harlem. By training a young Liberty League member named Marcus Garvey, Harrison helped catalyze the rise of Garveyism and the largest transnational organization of African people in modern history. Harrison’s story shows that Black working-class history is grounded in community, political education, and labor organizing traditions of the kind that Kelley’s book exemplifies.

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I know you’re an incredible instructor, so I want to make sure I ask a teaching question. How do you bring this history into the classroom? What stories about Harrison do you tell and what sources do you use?

Great question! Yes, I’m a teacher before I’m a scholar. I bring this history into the classroom by using documents, songs, images, and writings from the period that bring it to life for my students. I also am a big fan of the “turn and talk” after presenting anything to the class. This allows students to get warmed up and iron out clarifying questions before we move on to whole group conversations. In my African American history course, I teach about Harrison’s story in relation to the Socialist Party, the Garvey movement, the “white world war,” and the so-called Harlem Renaissance. This book is more of an intellectual history than a biography. I wrote it as a series of thematic interpretations (on socialism, free love, etc.) so as to make the individual chapters serviceable in a stand-alone fashion for teachers and instructors who are not in a position to assign the whole book. Before she retired, my mother was a teacher by profession and I have a masters degree in teaching. I

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also taught high school and middle school for a number of years, so I aimed to for this book to reach not just scholars, but also teachers, young people, activists, students, organizers, and a broadly popular audience. Just like Harrison did.

Authors

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  Andrea Ringer

  Dr. Andrea Ringer is an associate professor of history at Tennessee State University where she writes about multispecies workforces. Her first book, *Circus World: Roustabouts, Animals, and the Work of Putting on the Big Show*, is a labor history of the tented shows. Her next project, under Vanderbilt University Press, is a biography of Old Kate, a mule in Nashville who headed streetcars, pulled repair wagons for the electric company, and retired to the city's first zoo.

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  Brian Kwoba

  Dr. Brian Kwoba is an associate professor of history and director of African and African American Studies at the University of Memphis. Over the past two decades, Dr. Kwoba has been an activist on issues including socialism, anti-imperialism, immigrant workers rights, climate justice, Falastin, decolonizing education, pan-Africanism, and the movement for Black lives. In his spare time, he is a big time music lover (especially live jazz), an Afrobeats DJ, and a frequent traveler to Kenya where he visits his dad's side of the family.

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