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The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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*Global Africana Review*

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## Chair's Note

It is our pleasure to present the sixth volume of our undergraduate research journal, the *Global Africana Review*. As with previous editions, this volume showcases some of the best research and scholarship of our students, with topics ranging across Africa and its diasporas, past and present. In addition to the contributors, a number of people helped to make this issue possible. We are grateful for the fine work of Professor Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja as the executive editor, along with the editorial talents that our managing editor Angela Pietrobon has once again brought to bear. We have benefited from the assistance of Rebekah Kati of Davis Library, who has been instrumental in the publication of this edition. Additionally, we are especially thankful to the Dean's Office and to Nicci Gafinowitz and her family for helping to defray the cost of this year's volume.

Claude A. Clegg III, PhD

Chair, Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies

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## **Introduction**

**Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja**

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

I am extremely proud to present this sixth volume of our undergraduate research journal in the Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies. Some of the papers in this issue were originally presented at our annual undergraduate research conference, where the best of our students exhibit their love of learning and commitment to research in the sciences and the humanities.

As in previous years, this volume contains papers focused on several burning issues in the world today, including those of the liberation of the people of Africa and their descendants in the diaspora from discrimination, oppression, and injustice; climate change and the fight against global warming; and related problems of economic and social change. Kimathi Muiruri opens the presentation with a discussion of the short-lived but rich Pan-African work of former Burkina Faso revolutionary leader and president Thomas Sankara. Focusing on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Sophia Fantauzzi reexamines the desegregation of public schools in North Carolina, the role that the US Supreme Court decisions on *Brown vs. the Board of Education* had on this process, and, most importantly, the role that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Black community groups played in bringing about change in this state and the South as a whole.

Bringing these two sides of the struggle of Africans and peoples of African descent together, Mina Yakubu examines the interconnectedness of Black liberation, with emphasis on the political relationships between African and African American leaders. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most influential American civil rights leader of the 1950s and 1960s, attended, along with his wife Coretta Scott King, the Independence of Ghana ceremony in March 1957. Other prominent US leaders to emphasize this linkage included the distinguished scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, who eventually became a Ghanaian citizen and is buried in Accra, Ghana's capital, the Black liberation leader Malcolm X, and the writer and activist Lorraine Hansberry.

The Green Belt Movement, the militant organization for environmental protection and human rights that Dr. Wangari Maathai organized in Kenya, with branches in a few other African countries, is examined by Kyende Kinoti in its three major impacts, namely mobilizing women to protect the environment by planting millions of trees and to promote democracy, to fight global warming, and to engage in economic and social development ventures. Women were also foot soldiers in the Montgomery (Alabama) bus boycott led by Rosa Parks and the Rev. King, and in numerous other demonstrations all over the United States against racism and all forms of discrimination. How religion impacted this struggle is examined by Amaya Graham in her article on how the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil rights organization that Dr. King and other preachers founded to fight Jim Crow, used religion as a weapon of liberation.

Finally, the issue ends with a review by Carley Wetzel of the outstanding book *Toward Freedom: The Cost of Race Reductionism* (Verso 2020) by Touré F. Reed, who continues to challenge established dogma in the progressive tradition of Adolph Reed Sr. and Jr., his grandfather and father.

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja  
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## **“The Color of African Unity”: The Pan-Africanist Rhetoric and Praxis of Thomas Sankara in the Burkina Faso Revolution, 1983–87**

**Kimathi Muiruri**

### **ABSTRACT**

In 1983, Captain Thomas Sankara was hoisted to the position of chairman of Upper Volta’s Conseil National de la Révolution on the back of a military coup, and at once became the president of the small West African state. He assumed office by pronouncing bold promises that his regime would be different than those of the nation’s past, including a commitment to a transformational development scheme that would make the country economically self-sufficient. Sankara, as a self-described African revolutionary, contended with not only the behemoth self-imposed task of national development, but also with another challenge: the expectation that he live up to the legacies of Africa’s past post-colonial revolutionaries—many of whom were out of power by the time of his ascension. During his short reign, from 1983 to 1987, he would not only re-name the nation to Burkina Faso and launch massive programs to ameliorate the underdevelopment that plagued rural areas, but also made concerted efforts to build upon the ideals of Pan-Africanism on a continent where political agency was uneven and uncertain. This article analyzes how, from the mantle of a poor, aid-dependent country, Sankara approached the project of discursively and materially advancing Pan-Africanism. This article concludes that Sankara’s rhetoric, endogenous development, and international policy promoted a specific brand of Pan-Africanism that privileged solidarity with working-class Africans at the expense of inter-governmental harmony. Simultaneously, the material reality of Burkina Faso’s capacity limited his substantive efforts to those that affected continental Pan-African influence, rather than international connections with the diaspora.

Keywords: Thomas Sankara, Pan-Africanism, development, neocolonialism, Burkina Faso

### **Introduction**

In early August of 1983, a small group of young military generals and soldiers marched from the town of Pô, Upper Volta to the nation’s capital of Ouagadougou. There, they carried out a scene that had become almost commonplace in the country’s short history: they overthrew the government. Led by a commander named Blaise Compaoré, they descended on the capital with two goals: the first was to free the popular military captain and former prime minister Thomas Sankara from his house arrest, and the second was to march to the residence of then-President Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo and depose him. Arriving after weeks of massive anti-government protests by students and unionists, the coup plotters faced little resistance. By day’s end they had achieved both priorities (Brittain 1985, 44–45). By night’s end, the group had named the freed prisoner Sankara as chairman of their Conseil National de la Révolution (CNR, or National

Revolutionary Council) and declared the council the supreme organ of the state (Skinner 1988e, 443).

The second half of the twentieth century was a time of upheaval—for better and for worse—on the continent of Africa. West Africa, in particular, experienced two decades of tumultuous change in the 1950s and 1960s, when sixteen territories subjected to European colonization since the nineteenth century became “free” nations by way of violent struggle, negotiation, and capitulation of European powers (Birmingham 1995, 25). Still, in the wake of freedom followed decades of neocolonialism, in which former African colonies were tied economically and culturally to their European colonizers and remained in relationships of subordination propped up by elite African leaders. One Sahelian<sup>1</sup> nation suffered under this burden to perhaps the greatest extent of them all: the small, landlocked, and perennially impoverished nation of Upper Volta. Between 1960, the year it gained independence from France, and 1983, the year of the August revolution, it was a nation totally dependent on foreign aid for survival and severely affected by drought and famine (Brittain 1985, 41–42). There were four post-independence heads of state prior to Captain Thomas Sankara, all of whom rose to power on the back of coups d’état. Although the scene that lifted Sankara to power was a near mimicry of the ascendance of his predecessors, he took office promising that his leadership would be anything but. In his first large national address, he told the people of Upper Volta over the radio, in unequivocal terms, that his government would carry out a “struggle against the subjugation of [their] country, and for the freedom, dignity, and progress of [their] people” (Sankara 1988c, 32). He would have only four years, from 1983 until 1987, to carry out this program.

Thomas Sankara was born in Yako, Upper Volta in December 1949. As one of the few children of a state functionary at the time, he led a relatively privileged childhood. He attended a secondary school and subsequently a military academy in Upper Volta called Prytanée Militaire de Kadiogo on scholarship (Harsch 2014, 8–10). It was at this military academy, under the instruction of the then-secretive leftist Adama Touré, that Sankara was purportedly first exposed to anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and revolutionary thinking (Harsch 2014, 10). After the academy, Sankara continued his military training when he was sent to Madagascar, another former French colony, to attend officers’ school. During his stay in Madagascar, he personally witnessed a military that worked in lockstep with the people on civilian development projects, and saw a popular uprising unfold in the streets of the capital city when the Malagasay Revolution unseated the government in 1972 (Leshoele 2019, 12). He soon after left Madagascar for the Parachute Training Centre in Pau, France, where he excelled as a student and sportsman. There, he was exposed to the litany of Marxian and Communist ideas in Paris, a hotbed for radical thinkers in Europe. After returning to Upper Volta in 1974, he became involved in radical student politics, including associating with the Organisation Communiste Voltaïque (OCV, or Voltaic Communist Organization) (Willikins 1989, 378–79). Thus, he was transformed from an apolitical military functionary—who participated in neither the Upper Volta coup earlier in his life nor the Malagasay Revolution—into a radical thinker with ambitions to change the course of history in his country.

Sankara led Burkina Faso from August 1983 until 1987, when he was assassinated and overthrown by his once co-conspirator Blaise Compaoré in another coup. He is significant

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<sup>1</sup> The adjective “Sahelian” denotes the countries of the Sahel, an ecoregion that straddles the Sahara Desert to the north and wooded grassland savannahs to the south and stretches from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean on the African continent.

among post-independence African leaders for two reasons. The first is his sweeping agenda to overhaul the society he encountered when he entered office. Symbolically, he renamed the country from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso in 1984 (Willikins 1989, 376). More substantially, he launched massive campaigns focused on civil service reorganization, public health, literacy, environmental protection, and agricultural reform to empower the poorest of the Burkinabé and advance the nation toward self-sufficiency (Leshoele 2019, 19–24). The second reason involves his positionality in the history and intellectual lineage of Third World revolutionaries. Sankara was notably well versed in the theories of Marx and Lenin, which guided his agenda (Leshoele 2019, 61). However, he also came to power at a time after the death, overthrow, or otherwise demise of the giants of African independence, and at a time when revolutionary movements the world over were waning. He was famously a great friend to Fidel Castro of Cuba and Muammar Gaddafi of Lybia, as well as an ardent admirer of Argentina’s Che Guevara (Leshoele 2019, 51–53). He was, from the time of his ascension, directly compared to post-independence African leaders such as Patrice Lumumba of Congo and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, as well as giants of Pan-Africanism such as Kwame Nkrumah (Skinner 1988e, 439). Sankara was a twentieth-century revolutionary with the benefit of hindsight on many of the twentieth century’s revolutions. He attempted to shape history as both a contemporary and descendant of those revolutions. Educated in France and in Africa, he carried with him a multitude of political thought and examples from which to draw.

As a leader, Sankara contended with the huge task of making Burkina Faso into a self-sufficient and formidable state. Still, he took seriously an even greater challenge: making Burkina Faso a force in the world-historical effort to rid the Third World of the scourges of (neo)colonialism. He was an internationalist, as demonstrated by his professed solidarities with Latin America and Palestine (Sankara 1988c, 54). However, in the mold of his continental predecessors, Sankara has also been described by modern African scholars as “profoundly Pan-Africanist” (Gakunzi 1991, 14).

Pan-Africanism is by necessity a generalizing concept debated among African leaders of the twentieth century, and it remains contentious today. There are several “schools” of Pan-Africanist thought, which are defined by Leshoele (2019). Sub-Saharan Pan-Africanism is an ideology that promotes mutual support among Black Africans and concentrates on areas south of the Sahara Desert, placing less emphasis on cooperation with Arab African states. Trans-Saharan Pan-Africanism rejects this reductionism, instead conceptualizing the total geographic unity of the African Continent. Different still, the Global Pan-Africanism popularized by Marcus Garvey, as discussed by Leshoele, advocates for Black unity of the continent and the diaspora, and in some interpretations, the teleology of a single Black state encompassing all of Africa (Leshoele 2019, 75–85). This article examines these various schools and considers Pan-African leadership to encompass those ideas and actions that seek to unite and improve the continent and forge intellectual or material connections within the diaspora that aim at Black cooperation.

Two questions precipitate from historians’ descriptions of Sankara as a “Pan-Africanist” leader, both of which this article will interrogate. First, to what extent could the leader of a small, landlocked nation craft his political ideology to connect with and support revolutions outside of his borders? Second, how could that leader, from the mantle of that small nation, craft policies to materially support the development of Pan-Africanism? Through an analysis of his rhetoric, endogenous development programs, and foreign policy, this article will contend that Sankara advanced a particular brand of Pan-Africanism that promoted unity among the global Black

diaspora based on class solidarity, but was simultaneously limited to material actions that advanced a continental Pan-Africanism.

### **Pan-Africanist Rhetoric and Historical Time-Space**

There is only one color—that of African unity. —Thomas Sankara (1988d, 67)

The legacy of Thomas Sankara is left to history in speeches, interviews, and brief glimpses. He was a man of action who wrote little personal philosophy and only in private. An excavation of his political philosophy must derive from the point where his words went into action: public addresses. In a testament to his character—and a boon to historians today—Sankara was no stranger to frankness in the public eye. He famously resigned from his post as the minister of information under the government of Saye Zerbo with a televised speech that denounced the Zerbo regime and stated his political aims for the future of Burkina Faso (Brittain 1985, 42). Thus, Sankara’s speeches are valuable sources for assessing his grand designs for and conception of the Burkinabé revolution.

Sankara’s addresses and interviews indicate that he saw the Burkinabé revolution as a point in a world-historical and African-historical movement, and that he believed in the indivisibility of the Burkinabé revolution from the liberation of the oppressed masses of Africa. His rhetoric is also evidence that he borrowed from other Pan-African leaders in his tactics to agitate and mobilize the Burkinabé masses. His landmark address to launch the country’s social and economic revolution in 1984, called the “Political Orientation Speech,” which was reprinted and disseminated in pamphlets across the nation, attests to both inclinations (Sankara 1988c, 30).

Sankara repeatedly suggests that he conceived of the Burkinabé revolution as part of a world-historical movement. His address starts by assessing the importance of world-historical developments in the creation of Burkina Faso’s political state. He acknowledges that the phenomenon of Upper Volta’s autonomy, granted in 1960, was a direct result of the French defeats in Indochina (Vietnam) and Algeria. He contends that those violent struggles paved the way for Burkina independence, but in the absence of a durable Burkinabé leadership, also led to the calamity of neocolonial political paramountcy in the post-independence landscape (Sankara 1988c, 33). He concluded his address by affirming that “[Burkina’s] revolution is an integral part of the world movement for peace and democracy against imperialism,” specifically citing the struggles of the Sarahoui<sup>2</sup> and Namibian peoples of western and southwestern Africa (Sankara 1988c, 54). Ernest Harsch, a historian who spent considerable time with Sankara during his years as president, noted that the latter repeatedly framed Burkina’s revolution as part of a “wider, regional, continental struggle” (2013).<sup>3</sup>

Peer heads of state recognized the global thinking of Sankara’s revolutionary ideology as well. Fellow African leaders in Ghana, the Congo, and Angola, themselves among the revolutionary regimes in Africa at the time, commended this outlook. Wilkins writes, citing a contemporaneous *African Elite* magazine article from November 20, 1987, during Sankara’s

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<sup>2</sup> The Sarahoui people are Arab Africans in the Western Sahara region, northwest of Burkina Faso, who at the time were struggling to be recognized as the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, separate from the neocolonial regime of Morocco.

<sup>3</sup> Article accessed via *Taylor and Francis Online* and page numbers are unavailable.

early reign, that leaders in these states “saw Sankara as a new kind of spokesman for the ‘African stand against poverty, corruption, and against Western domination’” (1989, 15).

Sankara’s intellectual rearing offers some clues as to why he perceived revolution as transnational. Adama Touré, his academy instructor who first seriously posed to him questions of revolution, was a member of *Partie Africaine de l’Indipendence* (PAI, or African Independence Party), a clandestine group of leftist thinkers that connected revolutionary discourses in Senegal, Upper Volta, and other West African states (Harsch 2014, 11). Sankara clearly conceived of his struggle in the context of Third World history and in connection with contemporary struggles outside of Burkina Faso’s borders, lending his rhetorical weight to international solidarity across the continent—and equally importantly, contemporaries received this rhetoric well.

Not only did he conceive of his revolution as a chapter in a grander story of African collective emancipation, but Sankara also borrowed from Pan-African thinkers to elucidate his theory of change. In the “Political Orientation Speech,” Sankara explicitly positioned the Burkina masses as a people who comprised part of the “wretched of the earth” (Sankara 1988c, 35). This reference to the writing of Frantz Fanon would have only been pertinent to the few who had been exposed to the ideas of Fanon (literacy in Burkina Faso was then extremely low). Still, its function was to agitate and mobilize. To some of the students and teachers at Ouagadougou, the capital and center of education in the country, this was likely a powerful allusion that helped to clarify their new leader’s idea of how revolution must progress and for whom the revolution must fight. Moreover, when asked directly by Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti if he was “taking up the torch” of Kwame Nkrumah as a leader of Pan-Africanism, Sankara replied that it was “a duty of all Africans to continue in that direction if they wanted to free themselves” (as quoted in Tabi 2015, 84–85). His tacit adoption of the mantle of a then-ousted Pan-African leader is further testimony to his willingness to advance a philosophy that borrowed from others.

A salient counterpoint to claims of Pan-African sentiment in Sankara’s rhetoric is his hesitancy to endorse complete African unity with the diverse political ideologies of different African states. For example, he notoriously developed sour relations with the more conservative and pro-Europe regimes of Mali, Ivory Coast, and Togo, actively calling them out as neocolonial and dependent regimes in 1985 (Harsch 2013, 67). He even positioned himself as a threat to their power, arguing that Africans should contend with the reactionaries in their nations (Sankara 1988d, 62), and offering support to would-be rebels in Mali (Sankara 1988f, 147).

This rhetoric posing challenges against fellow African leaders is certainly an abrogation of “Pan-Africanism,” but it did not represent a complete contradiction. Sankara’s conflict with conservative regimes, while ideologically fracturing, were rather a clarification of his conception of Pan-Africanism. He positioned Burkina’s revolution as the ally of African *peoples*, rather than African states. While his challenges to other West African regimes fractured the unity of African states, they reified his commitment to the liberation of masses. As an avowed leftist, Sankara’s class politics permeated his Pan-Africanism. Skinner suggests that ill-advised battles like these represented his inability to contend with the material power structures of his time, ultimately contributing to his demise (1988, 455). However, these convictions represented his contribution to the shaping of Pan-Africanism with class characteristics, not a contradiction of Pan-African sentiment.

Regardless of Sankara’s ability to actualize these ideologies, his inclusion of a wider struggle in his conceptualization of revolution is informative of his intellectual development within the post-independence Pan-African movement. Sankara committed his rhetorical impressions to reflect the place of his revolution in history and reify the importance of his intellectual

predecessors in the formation of revolutionary politics. In doing so, he used his most public forum to forge connections that strengthened Pan-African solidarity with class characteristics.

### **Endogenous Development with Continental Influence**

We didn't make our revolution to export it. But we don't intend to tie ourselves up in knots to continue the Burkinabé revolution inside an impenetrable fortress. Our revolution is an ideology that blows freely and that is at the service of all those who feel the need to avail themselves of it. —Thomas Sankara (1988d, 72)

The CNR faced a behemoth task in 1983, as their leader proclaimed that they would develop one of the most impoverished nations in the world into a self-sufficient economy without help from the traditional capital lending institutions (Sankara 1988c, 50). The council set out toward unparalleled transformations in both pace and scale, true to their revolutionary label. In line with their class-oriented political ideology, the vast majority of these projects focused on uplift for the peasants and poor of Burkina Faso. Although an unlikely domain in which Pan-African solidarity could be formed, parts of Sankara's domestic development program also fortified the Pan-African mandates of his rhetoric by uplifting the poorest in neighboring nations and decentralizing power to acknowledge the differences of "African" peoples within Burkina Faso.

True to his words quoted at the beginning of this section, Sankara and the CNR constructed development programs such that the poorest people of West Africa could "avail themselves" of the mammoth projects that Burkina Faso undertook, specifically in relation to youth policy. The most obvious evidence of this Pan-African strategy precipitated from the CNR vaccination campaign. Sankara's government, in 1986, launched operation "Vaccine Commando," which in two weeks vaccinated two million Burkinabé children against meningitis, measles, and yellow fever (Leshoele 2019, 21). While doing so, the state concurrently provided this vital service to others in the region. According to a reporter on the ground during the campaign, "parents in neighbouring nations heard about the campaign and crossed over the border to have their children inoculated," to such an extent that "many posts had to requisition additional vaccines" (Novicki 1986, 70). This evidence, although anecdotal, remains reliable due to its proximity to the events. It also attests that the CNR carried through on their promises to aid the poor of Africa where possible, expending extra resources to avoid turning away any African with the desire to partake in the fruits of their planning. This solidarity—perhaps from fidelity to principles, perhaps in the hope of evoking mutual reciprocity—represented a material effect on Pan-Africanism in the development politics of Burkina Faso under Sankara's regime.

Moreover, in the domain of education, Sankara's government set out to train students to become good Pan-Africanists. In the "Political Orientation Speech," Sankara noted forcefully that the Burkinabé "must be able to take all that is good from [their] past...as well as all that is positive in foreign cultures," and that students should be able to "critically and positively assimilate the ideas and experiences of other peoples" (1988c, 51–52). This commitment to learning from and along with other nations was actualized in Sankara's literacy campaigns. In a 1986 address to the First Francophone Summit, Sankara criticized but ultimately embraced the paramountcy of French in West African former colonies, praising it as a "means of communication with other peoples" through which the Burkinabé could, "with [their] Africa brothers, analyze [their] respective situation and seek to join efforts in common struggle" (2007b, 94). Years earlier, the CNR had launched their first literacy campaign in 1984, which included French language instruction (Leshoele 2019, 22). This campaign, although not



explicitly for the benefit of other African nations, nonetheless served to link Burkina Faso with its peers in the spirit of common struggle. It is highly likely that the Burkinabé children who learned to communicate in French gained access to literature and communication in ways that connected them with the same ideas and relationships that Sankara himself had developed throughout his education. While not an external program, the literacy campaign represented an avenue to connect Burkina Faso with the West African Francophone world in the future, further contributing to the possibilities of Pan-Africanism.

In a similar manner to the CNR's French language literacy program, the very structure of the government established following the August revolution of 1983 aimed to facilitate greater cooperation among distinct African peoples. Much of Sankara's focus in building a Burkinabé national identity was in fact approached through a kind of Pan-Africanism; he sought to recognize and unify the disparate ethnicities of the peoples bounded in a territory whose limits were defined by colonialism. To understand this nuance, one must consider in context the regional imperatives of "Pan-Africanism"; the people of Burkina Faso, although living in one state, represented a multitude of nations that had been conquered and subjugated by the French into one territory. Those called "Burkina" in 1984 were, in fact, variously Mossi, Samo, Gorounsi, Tuareg, Gourmantché, and other ethnicities with different relationships and life histories (Harsch 2014, 9). Therefore, internal efforts toward better relations between these distinct nations could function as a Pan-African project.

In its pursuit of improving these relations, Sankara's CNR placed an emphasis on de-centering ethnicity as an organizing category and on disseminating power to the people for local enactment of revolutionary activity. Among his first acts of internal nation building was nationalizing all lands on August 4, 1984. This action served to disempower the indigenous institution of "landlords" who held and shared agricultural space with their ethnic kin, unseating "the power of traditional chiefs" (Williamson 2013, 47). Simultaneously, the CNR moved to displace the political domination of ethnic Mossi people—the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso—to ensure greater ethnic equality throughout the revolution (Williamson 2013, 43–44). From the very outset of the revolution, Sankara made clear, in his own words, that a paramount national task would be to "unite the different nationalities that comprise Upper Volta in the common struggle against enemies of [their] revolution" (1988c, 53). What Sankara espoused in this address was an astute recognition that Pan-Africanism was an internal project of the state as much as it was a project of the continent. The CNR as a national body presided over multiple nations, and internal Pan-Africanism coursed through their endogenous development programs to address this challenge.

One method Sankara deployed to build coalitions among different geographies and ethnicities was decentralizing the decision-making power of the revolution and putting local power in place to lead the national project. Sankara made an open call to the people during his "Political Orientation Speech" of October 1983 to form *Comités de Défense de la Révolution* (CDR, or Committees for the Defense of the Revolution) in towns and workplaces (Williamson 2013, 37). These committees, as envisioned by Sankara, would be the conduits of revolutionary power in local areas and be responsible for educating and mobilizing the population while implementing projects in the manner best for local conditions (Sankara 1988c, 43–44). In national economic development schemes, the CDRs would be responsible for "encouraging economic exchange among [different regions]" and "combatting prejudice among ethnic groups, [while] resolving differences between them to promote unity" (Sankara 1988c, 53). By 1987, there were over seven hundred CDRs in the nation (Harsch 2013). Sankara and the CNR

recognized the challenge of uniting people who had been, until then, relatively isolated and in ethnic enclaves across different geographies—especially in the rural areas. They responded not by doing away with ethnicity, but rather by creating centers of power throughout those rural regions, with connections to and mandates from a national organizing body.

There are salient critiques of the CNR's decentralized and anti-ethnic approach to nation building. Leshoele argues that the CDRs were established too quickly and given too much power, essentially sidelining traditional structures of African power, and thus alienating many people from the national project (2019, 55). Sankara's drive to dissolve internal division took a great deal of power from the main national body and gave it to the young revolutionaries of the CDRs, stripping power from the ethnic elders in Burkinabé society. While the policy may have been expeditious for implementing reforms with haste, it simultaneously upset the balance of long pre-existing power structures, rather incorporating those structures into the national effort. The CDRs became sites of power abuse and funds misappropriation, which Sankara acknowledged in a 1986 speech—all the while reaffirming that CDRs must be the drivers of revolution (Sankara 1988a, 170–74). The disorganization of CDRs likely reflected the lack of organic, recognizable power relationships within them—the kind of relationships and social infrastructure previously negotiated by Burkinabé people within their ethnic communities. These faults may have been missteps of the CNR and Sankara, or they may represent the limits of Pan-African consciousness and political development over such a short period. In any case, they show that Sankara's approach to non-ethnic internal Pan-Africanism was insufficient. This nation-building strategy was unique among contemporary nations, and thus provides evidence that Sankara attempted to mobilize Pan-Africanism as an internal project for the nations within Burkina Faso. Still, the aim to dissolve and unseat social paradigms so quickly was in some ways a deleterious approach to the challenge of building a nation.

Sankara's internal development program was ambitious and, in the context of African post-colonial states, enviable. However, the goals of this development effort were not strictly economic nor internal. The revolutionary government in Burkina Faso sought, through vaccination campaigns, literacy campaigns, and internal social reorganization, to advance the goals of cooperation among African peoples. Facing challenges common to other African leaders of his time—health disparities, education deficiencies, and internal division—Sankara sought to wield development programs as tools to promote national and continental mutual uplift. Although they are not without their faults, the ideology and material outcomes of these policies demonstrate that endogenous development programming was a site of Pan-African politics for Sankara's regime.

### **Pan-African Movements on the International Stage**

The anti-imperialist African countries are our objective allies. Rapprochement with these countries is necessary because of the neocolonial groupings that operate on our continent. —Thomas Sankara (1988c, 54)

International relations are the most obvious policy arena in which Pan-African politics can be exercised. The attitude of leaders toward fellow African states—and Afro-descended peoples the world over—is the most apparent area in which one can build material Pan-African developments. However, as demonstrated in the previous sections, Thomas Sankara practiced a specific philosophy of Pan-Africanism distinct from both the antecedent Pan-African leaders and expectations of contemporaries: class-based solidarity. Burkina Faso's mode of Pan-Africanist

engagement with the international community during the years of the revolution also followed this framework. Sankara's Pan-Africanism was not merely trade- or state- based, but rather focused on fortifying a unifying ideology for the African continent and seeking to solidify a universal anti-imperial sentiment for the purpose of liberation. He lobbied for this anti-imperial positionality through leveraging the common African interests of anti-apartheid activism and debt refusal.

The most prominent African issue for which Sankara wielded his power to encourage African cooperation was the problem of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In one of his earliest press conferences to the nation—doubtless seen by other peoples and leaders around Africa—Sankara insisted that “racist South Africa will always be a thorn in Africa's side” (1988d, 68). He posited that the question of apartheid was not a national one within South Africa, but rather a continental issue with which all African states had to contend. This framing is consistent with Sankara's specific conception of Pan-Africanism aimed at liberating the most oppressed.

Putting this commitment into action, Sankara led Burkina Faso to a boycott of all South African goods as well as the Shell petroleum company due to their dealings with the apartheid regime, in addition to demanding unity with South Africa from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (Harsch 2014, 64–65). These boycotts represented some of the only material entreaties that Sankara could make on the part of international Pan-Africanism due to the limited power of Burkina Faso as a small and poor nation. He argued that the OAU was to blame for the death of Samora Machel, leader of the Mozambiquan Liberation Front, allegedly at the hands of the apartheid regime, because other African states did not provide support to him (Tabi 2015, 92). He prioritized anti-apartheid action, but still Burkina Faso could not provide sufficient material support on its own. Resistance to and pressure on the apartheid regime was a key facet of his international strategy, but there was little beyond economic pressure that they could provide as a nation. Still, what Sankara contributed to African political discourse was a strong voice to argue that Africa should be united around these common interests—of the frontline states for protection of the rest of the continent, and of Black South Africans for liberation from second-class citizenship. As opposed to advancing arguments for development or commerce, Sankara focused on promoting collective action for liberation.

This paradox captures well the value and limitations of Sankara's continental Pan-African practice. As a leader, he was constantly vigilant of liberation for the most oppressed of Africa, but beyond beseeching other states to join his efforts, he could provide little material impact. What impact he was able to offer was confined to the continent itself.

Additionally, Sankara's international Pan-Africanism was substantially based in anti-neocolonial action as a guiding priority for African unity. As the president of Burkina Faso, and eminently concerned with neocolonial economic exploitation, Sankara sought to leverage the common interests of African nations to build a coalition that could present a united front against debt repayment to Western creditors. In 1987, he spoke about this vision to heads of state at the OAU summit in no uncertain terms, saying: “We cannot repay the debt because we have nothing to pay it with. We cannot repay the debt because it is not our responsibility. We cannot repay the debt because, on the contrary, the [Western nations] owe us something that the greatest riches can never repay—a debt of blood. It is our blood that is shed” (Tabi 2015, 89). Sankara also posited to a summit of the Nonaligned Movement states that Burkina Faso could not reject the debt alone, and that at least fifteen nations would have to join in for them to “successfully resist and win” (1988b, 190–91).

This represented Sankara's only significant effort to build a united coalition with other African states to resist Western influence. The terms and language with which he imagined such a coalition are informative. Sankara was concerned with creating Pan-African solidarity, with the goal of reducing neocolonial influence on the continent. He leveraged the common experience of African states—exploitation at the hands of Western states and the Bretton Woods institutions—to influence other leaders toward anti-colonial action. He referenced the brutality of those actors toward all Africans as the basis on which African states should be united and feel vindicated for posing such resistance. The coalition never materialized, but the proposal demonstrates Sankara's international Pan-Africanist goals: to unite the states of the continent toward an end of African autonomy and independence, free from the influence of neocolonialism. The class and economic characteristics of his ideology were consistent.

The quintessential demonstration of Sankara's vision for Pan-Africanism on the continent was his relationship to the OAU. He was a supporter of the organization, exclaiming its potential, but he simultaneously remained critical of the states he believed were counterrevolutionary. Sankara stated in 1984 that he welcomed “the crisis of redefining priorities” for the OAU (1988d, 65). The “crisis” was that of tensions between progressive governments and conservative, neocolonial regimes. His priority was not uniting African nations with divergent interests, but advancing a unified front of African states dedicated to dismantling colonial legacies. He did not see all African states or peoples as equally relevant to the revolution; he prioritized uplift of the poor and the power of the left-leaning states (Sankara 1988f, 147). His Pan-Africanism was conditional on a specific politics of Africa.

Sankara's international politics were visionary, yet constrained. As the leader of a small nation, he focused his efforts on leveraging the common interests of African nations to blaze a trail for cooperation, rather than contributing to change with the largesse of his state's coffers. This choice was a practical one, but ultimately meant that the extent of his material Pan-Africanist efforts would remain on the continent, where his ideas could directly affect and influence other peoples. By taking strong stances on anti-apartheid action and beseeching his fellow Africans to reject the position of the neocolony, he attempted to unseat the legitimacy of conservative and neocolonial regimes. In doing so, Sankara created a conception of Pan-Africanism that was not for African states or leaders, but for African peoples.

## **Conclusion**

Thomas Sankara's reign was a time of both jubilation and toil for the people of Burkina Faso, in line with their leader's conception of revolution. It was a period shaped metaphorically by the intellectual heritage of Sankara, and literally by the hands of the Burkinabé people. Sankara both borrowed from early- and mid-twentieth-century Pan-African politics, left unfinished by his predecessors, and changed the possibilities of Pan-Africanism with the rhetoric and policies he deployed. Leshoele argues that the African leaders of today can and should borrow from Sankara's practice because it was so generative in reforming the movement at a time when it was waning (2019, 236–39). As a head of state for only four years, he veritably changed for posterity the principles of the Pan-African movement by demonstrating what it could be—and simultaneously how it is limited.

When Sankara assumed power, “Burkina Faso was regarded as little more than a remote backwater...a labour reserve of young, able-bodied men” (Harsch 2013). By the time he was assassinated, his promises and actions were feared by the (neo)colonizers he fought against. To be sure, this was because Sankara made strides in proving the possibilities for African self-

sufficiency with socialist characteristics amidst the political pressures of the Cold War. However, it was undoubtedly also because he expanded the possibilities for togetherness among “the wretched of the earth.” His influence remains palpable today. The youth of Burkina Faso who took to the streets to overthrow Blaise Compaoré in 2014 chanted Sankara’s slogans, clearly referencing the better futures he had imagined, and which African leaders since his demise have failed to realize (Harsch 2013).

Captain Thomas Sankara, through his political rhetoric, endogenous development projects, and international politics positioned the people of a tiny, landlocked nation as “heirs of all the world’s revolutions” (Sankara 2007, 70). Thinking globally, but constrained locally, he both revived the ideas of Pan-Africanism’s past and reconstructed the possibilities of Pan-Africanism’s potential as a movement for the liberation of the most oppressed.

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## ***Coppedge v. Franklin* and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg*: The Contributions Toward the Fight for Desegregation in North Carolina Public Schools**

**Sophia Fantauzzi**

### ABSTRACT

The fight for school desegregation in North Carolina was a hard fought and long battle. Despite 1954–55 *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions of the US Supreme Court, school desegregation persisted. The significance of the first and second *Brown* decisions (often referred to as *Brown I* and *Brown II*) was not overlooked but challenged because of how the *Brown* decision underestimated how to fully eliminate barriers that manifested through unequal treatment and funding of segregated schools. North Carolina politicians employed mechanisms such as freedom of choice plans, the Pupil Assignment Act, and the Pearsall Plan to ensure the slow integration of North Carolina public schools. The evaluation of public opinion, North Carolina politics, and legal decisions employs a robust image of the battle between those who wanted integration and those who were staunch proponents of segregated schooling. This article provides an understanding of North Carolina’s “moderate” reputation and evaluates the compliance of North Carolina government officials to national legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and federal financial assistance measures through the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. By analyzing national government legislation put forth in congruence with the fourth circuit district court case *Coppedge v. Franklin County Board of Education* [1967] and the Supreme Court case *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* [1971], this article shows the contributions of two legal cases to the desegregation of North Carolina public schools and how each case was necessary to achieving a more equal educational experience.

Keywords: *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Coppedge v. Franklin*, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg*, desegregation, token integration

### Introduction

Historically, *Brown v. Board of Education* is known for its overturning of the “separate but equal” doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896 to declare racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional. In North Carolina, like in many states, segregation was the law of the land prior to 1955. After 1955, desegregation was slow even though North Carolina was nationally recognized for being one of the first states to comply with the *Brown* decision, as this reputation did not match reality. North Carolina school officials and politicians supported the “freedom of choice” plans that vastly slowed desegregation. The decision underestimated the difficulties of eliminating unequal funding, treatment, and other barriers of segregation for African American students. Supplemental cases, such as *Coppedge v. Franklin County Board of Education* [1967] and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* [1971], were

necessary to further desegregate North Carolina public schools. The *Brown v. Board* decision left a legacy that highlighted the disparities of the educational system but failed to find the legal means to confront them and implement the multicultural education experience expected from integration.

### **What *Brown* Meant for Desegregation**

The ruling of the *Brown* case began the process of desegregating public spaces and is understood as one of the first movements toward equal education opportunities. *Brown* is significant because of its first steps toward desegregation and for the opposition that became the centerpiece of American politics and interpretations of the law for the next twenty years. Prior to *Brown*, every state in the US practiced racial segregation in school based on de jure or de facto segregation. De jure segregation is based on law, while de facto segregation is based on custom, or most followed patterns of residence. Before the first ruling of *Brown*, the dual system of schools was strongly established in seventeen states, one of which was North Carolina. Segregation in North Carolina was required by the state constitution and state statute (New York Times 1954). North Carolina, during this time, was not considered part of the Deep South, but an upper southern state where its citizens prided themselves on following law and order. This does not indicate that North Carolinians harbored no negative feelings about the Supreme Court decision: in fact, many thought it altered the constitution and that the court had acted with no legal precedent (Klarman 1994, 93). On May 17, 1954, in the first *Brown* decision, the court unanimously ruled that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place” (para. 6), explicitly overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson* [1896]. *Brown I* was one of the first indications that southern race relations were “destined to change,” due to the ruling’s “unambiguous, highly salient” nature (Daniel 2004, 261). The second decision, issued in 1955, also known as *Brown II*, was the implementation phase. *Brown II* ordered the dismantling of segregation in school systems to proceed with “all deliberate speed” (para. 7). The *Brown II* decision erred on the side of caution, displeasing both supporters of integration and its opponents. Furthermore, it “failed to provide much direction to the lower courts” due to the vagueness of the phrase “all deliberate speed” in terms of school desegregation progression (Daniel 2004, 261). The unintended consequences lay in the many strategies of resistance to the decision. *Brown* had little direct impact on desegregation. In fact, “in upper South states such as Tennessee and North Carolina, the percentage of blacks attending desegregated schools was, respectively, 0.12 percent and 0.01 percent in 1959–1960, and 2.7 percent and 0.54 percent in 1963–1964” (Klarman 1994, 83). Thus, more had to be done in the fight for desegregation, especially in North Carolina.

North Carolina’s reaction to the ruling was quieter, as “state leaders had initially greeted the Brown edict with grudging acceptance, and in some cases warm approval,” and state education leaders “met one week after the Brown decision to discuss the problems of school attendance, transportation, and teacher assignment that would have to be faced under the new ruling” (Chafe 1980, 65). North Carolina state leaders accepted the decision, while upholding a moderate reputation due to their quieter reactions and compliance. It is important to note that “a school district’s compliance with Brown often merely meant offering ‘freedom-of-choice’ plans,” which “allowed courageous Blacks to enter white schools; few whites entered the previously all-Black schools” (Daniel 2004, 261). North Carolina’s moderate reputation was based on its decision not to engage in massive resistance, unlike other states like Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi. North Carolina was viewed as moderate because no penalties were enacted for attempts to desegregate schools and no schools were closed abruptly to avoid desegregation,



unlike with the state's southern counterparts. What set North Carolina's approach apart from that of other southern states was the local referendum requirement on school closings (Batchelor 2015, 67). North Carolina also experienced lower rates of intimidation, violence, and restrictions of freedom than other southern states (Batchelor 2015, 5).

North Carolina's moderate reputation and reality did not align. Black North Carolinians suffered from prejudice, hate, and inequality, especially with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) being very active in the state. Governor William B. Umstead took what was perceived as a moderate position on desegregation because he "acknowledged that 'the Supreme Court...has spoken,'" and the actions he took "toward working out means of compliance" were utterly different from other southern states (Chafe 1980, 65). Umstead, governor from 1953 until his death in 1954, at first supported segregation during his gubernatorial campaign, but altered his position after *Brown I* to preserve education and acknowledged the new law without outright defiance. For Umstead, preserving public education meant keeping the support of whites and what they wanted—the continuance of racially segregated schools. Umstead thus allowed local school boards across North Carolina to maintain racially segregated schools. After Umstead's death, Lieutenant Governor Luther H. Hodges served as North Carolina's governor from 1954 to 1961. Hodges continued a moderate rhetoric like that of the late Umstead until *Brown II*, after which he addressed the state in June 1955, claiming, "We must keep the peace if we are going to keep the schools...This is a time for calmness and courage. We need wise counsel rather than inflammatory headlines" (as quoted in Batchelor 2015, 44). He further urged the citizens of North Carolina to maintain and practice voluntary segregation for the 1956–57 school year. Hodges continued the stance of not favoring integration, but also considered preserving and following the law to be most important ("School Desegregation in Southern States, 1965–1966"). Even though *Brown* intended complete desegregation, several measures of pushback began in North Carolina in the name of "preserving" public education.

### **Pupil Assignment Act of 1955 and the Pearsall Plan**

Following the *Brown* decision, the state progressed with two anti-integration responses: the North Carolina Pupil Assignment Act of 1955 and the Pearsall Plan of 1956. Freedom of choice seemed like a viable option for desegregation, but the true purpose was "to forestall any meaningful level of racial desegregation while avoiding the categorical segregation condemned by *Brown* and increasingly unacceptable to federal jurists and the national government" (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 162). The Pupil Assignment Act was passed in March, but not without some pushback from the Black community. In the early months of 1955, the Pupil Assignment Act, hailed the "segregation bill," brought together "50 Black leaders from throughout North Carolina [who] met in Durham in January 1955 to oppose the 'segregation bill' and urge testimony before the General Assembly...During the second week of February 1955 some 300 North Carolina leaders protested the bill" (Peebles-Wilkins 1987, 115). Despite the opposition, the general assembly passed the legislation. The Pupil Assignment Act had three major components that shifted the authority of desegregation from the state to local school education boards, thus eliminating the potential for lawsuits directed at all schools in the state. It made no direct reference to race, instead centralizing the language to include what would be in the "best interest" of the child, "effective instruction" of students, and "orderly and efficient administration of the schools" (Thuesen 2013, 208). The Pupil Assignment Act ensured a lengthy transition from segregation to complete integration and was one way that North Carolina leaders slowed the process of desegregation.

The first Pearsall Committee, also known as the Governors' Special Advisory Committee on Education, was created by Governor Umstead after the first *Brown* ruling. Thomas J. Pearsall, speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives, was head chairman. The committee drafted their first report in December, having two main objectives: "Preservation of public education...[and] Preservation of the peace." It urged North Carolinians "to act coolly, exercise restraint, exhibit tolerance, and display wisdom," and further stated that "the mixing of the races in the public schools...cannot be accomplished and should not be attempted" ("Governor's Advisory Committee on Education, 1954 Reports").

After the death of Governor Umstead, Lieutenant Governor Hodges continued the Pearsall Committee and decided to follow his predecessor in giving sole responsibility for public education to local school boards across the state. Following the ruling of *Brown II*, Hodges appointed the second North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education to consider the Supreme Court's implementation orders (Batchelor 2015, 44). As Hodges feared that Black members would be too susceptible to pressure from the NAACP, this second committee excluded them. The NAACP pushed for desegregation to start immediately and was considered by state officials to be an extremist group. In this ingenious approach of lambasting the NAACP, Hodges "evok[ed] fears of racial 'mixing' and united white conservatives" to endorse the committee and the plan they would soon set forth (Chafe 1980, 81). The second Pearsall Committee consisted of all white, male politicians or attorneys and appeared to be predisposed toward maintaining segregation (Batchelor 2015, 45). The committee members did not sufficiently represent counties with large Black populations, and the committee was not representative of the entire state. As a response to the push for integration imposed by the *Brown* decision, the second committee produced a plan named after the chairman, the Pearsall Plan to "Save Our Schools." Amended Article IX of the North Carolina State Constitution included the Pearsall Plan, and by majority vote it became part of the state's public school laws (Peebles-Wilkins 1987, 114). This amendment added three crucial features. First, it proposed a local option provision for permitting the suspension of operations of public schools by popular vote of the local community if school conditions were considered intolerable. The second was that the state would provide educational expense grants to private schools for children whose parents objected to their child attending an integrated school. The third was an amendment to the compulsory school attendance requirements, which allowed students to not be forced to attend school when a parent did not want their child to attend a mixed-race school; when it was not reasonable for them to be reassigned; and when it was not practical for them to attend private school ("Herring, Save Our Schools Pamphlet 1954"). Governor Hodges and the Pearsall Committee framed the Pearsall Plan as "a progressive alternative to extremism" (Chafe 1980, 73). This extremism included the violent, die-hard racists known as the KKK as well as the Black integrationists that demanded equality under the law, known as the NAACP. By equating the KKK and the NAACP, Hodges and the Pearsall Committee successfully manipulated public opinion; "the [Pearsall] plan was interpreted as a quintessence of moderation" and was seen as "the fire extinguisher to the fire set by the Supreme Court, noted as flexible and gradual and had safety value features" (Chafe 1980, 73-76). Progressive political leaders across the state and political leaders at the national level accepted Hodges' definition of the situation as "the only 'moderate' solution for the North Carolina school crisis" and "enabled North Carolina's business and political leaders to continue boosting the state as a progressive oasis in the South, a hospitable climate for Northern investment, [and] a civilized place in which to live" (Chafe 1980, 76-82). Through this

reputation and manipulation of public opinion, North Carolina upheld their moderate reputation as the Pearsall Plan was deemed valid.

The Pupil Assignment Act and the Pearsall Plan designed public policies that created measures to preserve the segregated landscape of public schooling and provide extreme token integration. North Carolina was nationally recognized for its compliance with the *Brown* decision, and the Pearsall Plan was deemed a “blueprint” for dealing with desegregation in the South (Peebles-Wilkins 1987, 117). This was despite the fact that the Pearsall Plan slowed desegregation of public schools and “represented a subtle and insidious form of racism” (Chafe 1980, 73). This national recognition was only an acknowledgement of legislation, not the result of the legislation passed in North Carolina. In reality, the Pupil Assignment Act and the Pearsall Plan made no public schools in North Carolina integrated besides some federally maintained schools on military bases, and by the 1963–64 school year, only one fourth of the state’s school districts had even begun to desegregate (Thuesen 2013, 202). Desegregation in North Carolina proceeded slowly, and integration did not begin to strengthen until the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

### **The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Federal Financial Assistance Measures**

As desegregation did not progress extensively after the rulings of *Brown I* and *II*, the federal government had to pass more legislation if it wanted an integrated, functioning society. After Lyndon B. Johnson became president, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which had five main provisions. The act outlawed discrimination in public spaces; authorized the attorney general to initiate suits or to intervene in school desegregation and other discrimination cases; forbade racial discrimination in places of employment and unions; permitted the halting of funds to federally aided, racially discriminatory, or segregated government-funded programs; and prohibited registrars from applying different standards to voting applicants (New York Times 1964). President Johnson claimed that the law’s purpose was “not to divide but to end division...and to promote...a more constant pursuit of justice and a deeper respect for human dignity” (New York Times 1964). North Carolina’s reaction to the new law was mixed. The *New York Times* reported that “reaction in North Carolina, while mixed, provided one of the brightest pictures of progress in the South. Led by Terry Sanford, many state and local officials took a position of acceptance and compliance” (Sitton 1964). As a result of the Civil Rights Act, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) became significantly involved in public education funding. The act “gave the U.S. Secretary of Education the authority to collect data to document implementation of *Brown* and provide grants to school districts to assist with school desegregation efforts” (Brown 2004, 182). Title VI stated that federal funds could be withdrawn from any racially discriminatory public or private agency (Drone 2005, 413–14). Title VI was important because it allowed any noncompliance to result in funding deficiencies. HEW officials became essential in desegregation efforts because they forced local school administrators to pledge compliance with the laws calling for nondiscrimination. These pledges had to be filed with HEW by March 1965 (Drone 2005, 414). The first set of desegregation guidelines were issued in April 1965 and detailed minimal requirements.

In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed by Congress to reward desegregation efforts with substantial funding for education (Batchelor 2015, 100–1). North Carolina’s moderate stance and its citizens’ overall compliance with law and order seemed to be rewarded by this new legislation, although some residents had a negative reaction. Specifically, the white citizens of Franklin County, an eastern county, claimed that they “disliked the federal government’s meddling in local affairs” (York 2020, 85). In April 1965, US

Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel announced that “North Carolina was the first state in full compliance with federal regulations and therefore was fully entitled to receive federal funds” (Drone 2005, 414). However, much of this money, approximately \$550,000, was to be directed to the eastern districts of North Carolina with high concentrations of Black students (York 2020, 83). The Civil Rights Act and the distribution of federal funding made school desegregation more of a necessity than ever because funding determined everything from teacher salaries and classroom construction to potential classes and training being taught. Southern states would have to move beyond tokenism and into integration if they wanted to keep their public schools afloat. In 1966, HEW released tougher, more specific guidelines “that looked skeptically at freedom-of-choice schemes and, moreover, introduced numerical school desegregation targets” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 162). Local school board segregationists were resistant to these changes, and “some districts that hadn’t desegregated tried to subvert compliance with HEW guidelines by getting a court order, because judicial standards varied” (Frankenburg and Taylor 2015, 38). HEW directed district courts to evaluate proposed desegregation plans based on the new guidelines, which led the way for courts to invalidate freedom of choice plans. HEW guidelines strengthened and indirectly affected the rulings of lower courts because they “were the minimum required as part of a court desegregation order, [and] they helped make judicial requirements more uniform across districts” (Frankenburg and Taylor 2015, 44). HEW continued to impose harsher guidelines over time to demand more desegregation progress as southern states continued to resist. With the Civil Rights Act and the ESEA, courts that struggled to implement desegregation to comply with *Brown* in the face of local resistance were further empowered and supported by laws.

### **Coppedge v. Franklin County Board of Education**

Before the 1965–66 school year, Franklin County schools were completely segregated by race. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the new HEW guidelines, the ESEA funding, and the court case *Coppedge v. Franklin County Board of Education* [1967] changed the landscape of Franklin County. The ruling of the case was essential for derailing the freedom of choice plans that North Carolina politicians had put forth with the Pearsall Plan in 1956 in compliance with the *Brown* decision. The 1966–67 school year brought little progression: “only six Black students attended schools with white students. In 1967–68 the figure stood at a mere forty-five” (Batchelor 2015, 71). In early August 1968, Judge Algernon Lee Butler ordered the complete desegregation of Franklin County. Butler was the chief judge of the US District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina (York 2020, 72). Judge Butler had a change in opinion concerning freedom of choice plans for school districts. After first supporting the idea, he realized that “freedom of choice was impossible in a county where intimidation of blacks was widespread” (York 2020, 72). Franklin County adopted the Pearsall Plan in 1956 and then adopted the freedom of choice system to desegregate its schools. Black residents began to exercise their rights under this plan and soon encountered serious threats. The KKK was large and visible, with membership estimated at “between seven hundred and two thousand” (York 2020, 29). The strong presence of the Klan resulted in school desegregation being incredibly slow, and nearly nonexistent.

In *Coppedge v. Franklin* [1967], plaintiffs filed complaints about a racially segregated school system that “was denying the plaintiffs and members of their class the equal protection of the law” (para. 1). Another complaint that Judge Butler addressed involved the unequal environments and conditions in which white and Black schools functioned. The plaintiffs’ motion further alleged “that defendants have continued to perpetuate inferior schools for Negro

students” (para. 6). In Judge Butler’s findings of fact, he noted that “schools previously maintained as all-white schools [were] substantially superior in building and equipment to the all-Negro schools,” and that despite the financial assistance under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “serious disparities remain[ed]” (para. 17). In the hearing on the application for a permanent injunction on July 27, 1966, the court entered an interim order. The interim order said that defendants were to “conduct a new freedom of choice period and were enjoined from engaging in any act, practice or policy of racial discrimination in the operation of the public-school system of Franklin County” (para. 4). In 1967, when both sides came before the court, the defendants argued that the Franklin County school system was not racially discriminatory and maintained they had followed the law, including the Civil Rights Act and the interim order. After hearing both sides, Judge Butler ruled on August 21 that the freedom of choice method of desegregation was invalid. The white citizens had mixed reactions, and the Franklin County Citizens for the Preservation of Public Schools called for a school boycott, but the plan was eventually abandoned (York 2020, 105).

Judge Butler’s ruling in *Coppedge* was one of the first that invalidated freedom of choice plans as a viable option for desegregation. The case highlighted racial disparities, but it also found that while the freedom of choice plan gave an illusion of desegregation, it actually rendered the people vulnerable to acts of intimidation. Butler’s decision would soon be accompanied by a Supreme Court ruling in 1968 that would also see freedom of choice plans as invalid plans for desegregation for all states.

### **The Significance of Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Board of Education**

On track to become one of the most significant school desegregation cases in history, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Board of Education* [1971] was a suit originally filed on January 19, 1965, by North Carolina lawyer Julius Chambers, as part of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF). Chambers’ initial attempt to change Charlotte’s racial landscape was unsuccessful until he renewed his efforts in federal court a few years later, which eventually brought him in front of the US Supreme Court in 1971. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system began token integration in 1957, but by the fall of 1964, it remained totally segregated (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 170). The school system was the forty-third largest in the nation, but only 3 percent of Black children were assigned to a majority-white school (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* [1971]). The school board had utilized the North Carolina Pupil Assignment Act to forestall meaningful school desegregation. Julius Chambers’ initial suit in 1964 was filed on the basis of challenging Charlotte’s continuation of racially-based pupil and teacher assignments and the school board’s use of gerrymandering to limit integration (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 167). Soon after, the school board adopted a new pupil assignment act in March 1965, in “which student assignment at 90 percent of the system’s 109 schools would be controlled by newly introduced geographic school attendance zones (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 167). Although Chambers rejected this plan entirely because it was not aimed at seeking full integration, the court upheld that the plan satisfied the *Brown* mandate. In 1968, the Supreme Court made a significant stride toward integration through the decision of *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* in Virginia. The ruling upheld the notion of *Coppedge v. Franklin* [1967], the case argued by Chambers in the Fourth Circuit court that nullified freedom of choice plans as adequate means for integration. After the Supreme Court ruling, Chambers reopened the *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* case, hoping that the *Green v. County School Board* ruling was an indication of a Supreme Court shift to favoring more rapid desegregation (Batchelor 2015, 126).

In the reopening of *Swann*, Chambers hoped to have the case heard by the newly appointed Judge James McMillan, who had been confirmed to the Western District of North Carolina in June 1968. Chambers perceived that Judge McMillan was “in the middle on the issue of school desegregation—neither an ardent segregationist nor a proponent of speedy or substantial alteration of the racial status quo” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 170). Chambers’ preference was solidified when he litigated *Swann* before McMillan. Initially, McMillan saw little wrong with the school board’s policies concerning desegregation, and even praised the board at the beginning of the hearing for a “higher level of desegregation than any of the other school systems reviewed in appellate court decisions” (Batchelor 2015, 126–28). Judge McMillan’s opinion began to change after hearing Chamber’s carefully crafted, impenetrable argument against the school board’s method of desegregation. In his notes on the hearing, he takes notice of how enlightened he was concerning the racial realities of local schools, and he even noted in the court documents “and I confess to having felt my own share of emotion on this subject and all the years before I studied the fact” (McMillan 1969–70). McMillan ordered the school board to draft plans for school desegregation to be proposed in court in June and August 1969.

In anticipation of Judge McMillan’s ruling, in June 1969, the North Carolina General Assembly passed an “anti-busing law that expressly prohibited the use of any state funds for court-ordered busing to implement desegregation” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 173). In February 1970, the school board presented two alternative pupil assignment plans to the district court, the partial “Finger Plan” and the finalized “Board plan.” The Finger Plan was submitted by court-appointed expert Dr. Finger, and only differed from the board plan in its handling of the system’s elementary schools. Both plans proposed rezoning attendance zones and implementing strategies of reassignment, but the board plan, with regard to elementary schools, “relied entirely upon gerrymandering of geographic zones” (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* [1971], para. 10). On February 5, 1970, McMillan ruled that only districtwide busing would be substantial enough for the process of school desegregation in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area, immediately opposing the June 1969 law passed by the North Carolina General Assembly. As this immediately attracted national attention, segregationists feared that McMillan’s decisions would be upheld and busing would become a national routine (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 178). Some opponents thought “Judge McMillan had gone beyond constitutional limits in his proposal to make Charlotte Schools one of the least segregated systems anywhere” (Saxon 1995). Unsatisfied with McMillan’s ruling, the school board appealed to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. Not only did the Fourth Circuit “vacate the orders with regard to busing elementary students” but during the appeals process, there was heavy opposition (Batchelor 2015, 126). The opposition came from Governor Scott of North Carolina, the State Board of Education, and the Nixon administration, who all denounced McMillan’s busing orders. President Nixon issued a statement that reinforced “his opposition to busing, again urging that students be permitted to attend neighborhood schools” (Batchelor 2015, 127). The win Chambers had hoped for in the *Swann* case was not yet in sight, and Chambers continued to fight.

Both Chambers and the school board were unsatisfied with the ruling of the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, paving the way for *Swann* to be heard in the US Supreme Court in 1971. Chambers opposed the “Fourth Circuit’s rejection of McMillan’s order for implementation of the Finger plan for elementary schools,” and the school board opposed “the affirmation of McMillan’s desegregation plans for the school system’s junior and senior high schools” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 185). Both sides requested that the Supreme Court review the case. The

Supreme Court named the central issue as student assignment and laid out four problem areas in section five, as follows:

(1) to what extent racial balance or racial quotas may be used as an implement in a remedial order to correct a previously segregated system; (2) whether every all-Negro and all-white school must be eliminated as an indispensable part of a remedial process of desegregation; (3) what the limits are, if any, on the rearrangement of school districts and attendance zones, as a remedial measure; and (4) what the limits are, if any, on the use of transportation facilities to correct state-enforced racial school segregation (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* [1971], para. 22).

The decision took several months, and by the summer of 1970, “it was clear that the Supreme Court would use Chambers’ Charlotte case as its vehicle for setting the terms of the proper scope of court-mandated school desegregation” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 179). The most controversial topic was the opinion on busing as a tool for desegregation, but the Court came to a unanimous decision in April 1971. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of *Swann*, upholding Judge McMillan’s order, and sanctioned the busing of white and Black students to other neighborhoods as a tool to achieve racial balance in schools. Chief Justice Burger wrote the final opinion and “rebuffed the school board and the justice department” by upholding the “constitutionality of busing as a means to dismantle the ‘dual school systems’ of the South” (Saxon 1995). The ruling was a substantial win for Chambers, but also for federal district court judges. For Chambers, the court-ordered busing “was a valid tool of equitable relief,” which Chambers and the LDF considered a complete victory (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 185). For federal district court judges, the decision affirmed McMillan’s order, which also affirmed the role of federal district courts in the overseeing of local school district operations. Prior to 1971, Supreme Court desegregation decisions, like the *Brown* decision, had failed to “delineate which equitable remedies lower courts could use in issuing desegregation orders” (Daniel 2004, 262). *Swann* not only filled this void but also was proof of the Supreme Court’s acknowledgement of the failures of earlier approaches to school desegregation, like the freedom of choice plans and pupil assignment acts in various states.

The Supreme Court ruling came with opposition, with the contesting parties reacting bitterly. There were tense periods for high schools, and as a result of the order, “Charlotte-Mecklenburg lost approximately ten thousand white students as white parents moved their families to rural districts over the next few years” (Batchelor 2015, 127). White parents in Charlotte formed “citizen” groups that opposed the newly integrated schools, and even several years after the Supreme Court ruling, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools refused to come up with a plan conforming to McMillan’s requirements. This required lawyer Julius Chambers to constantly monitor developments and Judge McMillan to “oversee the system’s desegregation efforts” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 187). Although opposition continued among Charlotte whites for many years, gradually “the finality of the Supreme Court’s decision and the determination of the Charlotte establishment to avoid unnecessary controversy led to the implementation of McMillan’s sweeping desegregation order—including its substantial use of busing—without serious incident” (Rosen and Mosnier 2017, 186). Four years later, McMillan withdrew his constant monitoring of the school system, after he found that “his plan had gained wide acceptance and decided that the busing of 45,000 of Charlotte’s 75,000 students was going well (Saxon 1995). The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system became a national model of successful transition to integrated schools by the mid-1970s.

## Conclusion

The path to school desegregation was not an easy one, especially with the perceived moderate reputation of North Carolina, which led to the successful postponement of desegregation through the Pearsall Plan and Pupil Assignment Act. The purpose here is not to discredit *Brown* and its accomplishments, but rather to recognize how school desegregation did not happen all at once. Political and legal systems often worked against each other, but with the persistence of Black integrationists, the federal government, and key legal experts like Julius Chambers, progress came along with hope for the multicultural, equal educational experience. The rulings of *Coppedge v. Franklin County Board of Education* [1967] and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* [1971] were influential in the fight for desegregation in North Carolina public schools because each of them invalidated North Carolina's so-called plans of desegregation in their own way. *Coppedge v. Franklin* invalidated freedom of choice plans proposed by the Pearsall Committee and set forth by the Pearsall Plan as a meaningful solution to segregated schools, while *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* validated busing as a solution to achieve integration. Working in congruence with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, both cases proposed concrete solutions for achieving integration and a multicultural educational experience. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* was significant in addressing racial disparities, the vague language of the *Brown* decisions caused the fight for desegregated schools to persist beyond 1955.

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## **The Interconnectedness of Black Liberation: The Cross-Political Relationship of African and African American Leaders in the Struggle for Independence and the Civil Rights Movement (1950–60)**

**Mina Yakubu**

### **ABSTRACT**

The linkages between African and African American freedom advocates began long before their demands actualized in the latter half of the 1950s and early 1960s. Some of the leaders of this global Black movement for self-determination met when they were students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States, notably, Lincoln University and Howard University. While these movements and their aims were generally connected, this article examines the close relationships of their political leaders. It was partly through their relationships that they were able to advance their political demands for freedom. The article explores the cross-political ties of African leaders Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe, and of African American leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, in their respective movements for human rights recognition from 1950 to the early 1960s. This was a time in which legal segregation and racial violence targeted Black people in the United States and the presence of European colonialism encroached on the sovereignty of Africans. This article explores how these political relations and the events of these movements influenced one another. This research intends to help readers understand the interconnectedness of the global Black struggle for self-determination, specifically as it relates to African American Civil Rights leaders and the leaders of independence movements in Africa like Azikiwe and Nkrumah, who would become the first presidents of Nigeria and Ghana, respectively.

Keywords: de-colonization, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Pan-African, Ghana, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

The anti-colonial movements on the African continent and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States transcended their respective borders through leaders who believed it was an era of global Black self-determination in the face of European-descended oppressors. These leaders believed the freedom of one group was entwined with the liberation of the other. The linkages of these communities existed long before their demands for self-determination actualized in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some of these linkages resulted from the education of future political and intellectual leaders at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the US. The period's defining events also strengthened the bond between the two communities as they

significantly spurred anti-colonial sentiment, namely, the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935,<sup>1</sup> World War II, and the fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945. This article traces the development of racial solidarity between these two groups by exploring the personal relationships between the movements' leaders and how two prominent African American organizations, the Council on African Affairs (CAA) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), supported the anti-colonial movement on the African continent. The article aims to help readers understand the interconnectedness of the global Black struggle for self-determination, specifically as it relates to African American Civil Rights leaders and African independence leaders, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah, who would become the first presidents of Nigeria and Ghana, respectively.

## Literature Review

The literature on this topic primarily agrees that specific events, notably the fifth Pan-African Congress (1945) and Ghana's independence (1957), inspired global solidarity for Black freedom and that the CAA led the African American solidarity campaign. However, there is disagreement about a long-held consensus—that the NAACP's anti-colonial advocacy declined at the dawn of the Cold War and the pronouncement of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. Thus, the linkage that unified African Americans and Africans significantly weakened, especially following the CAA's dissolution in 1955. Amid the Cold War, their relationship was redefined and constrained within the binary of support for either American imperialism or African decolonization. The latter was seen as a threat to Western democracy because independence across the continent presented potential frontiers for communism.

Penny Von Eschen, author of *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957*, asserts that the two groups predominately split along these lines: Africans were for decolonization, while prominent African American organizations, specifically, the NAACP, gave public support to America's imperialist policies. Von Eschen's claim is echoed by scholars like James L. Roark, in his piece "American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1943–1953." However, Carol Anderson, author of *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960*, disagrees, suggesting that the NAACP's anti-colonial advocacy did not dissipate in the late 1940s but simply evoked another way of fighting. These assertions are not mutually exclusive. However, while the NAACP did not completely renounce its support for anti-colonial movements, it deprioritized its anti-colonial efforts (at the expense of Africans negatively affected by American policies) for fear they might interfere with its advancement on domestic issues. This shift was evident at the All African Peoples' Conference (AAPC) in December 1958, where African Americans were severely underrepresented (Tunteng 1974, 44).

Aside from this disagreement, there is a general consensus about the unique role of the CAA and the defining events of the period. Von Eschen (1997) and Alhaji Conteh (2016) agree that the CAA was a rarity because the organization centered its advocacy efforts to advance decolonization movements across Africa. P. Kiven Tunteng (1974) and Kwadwo Afari-Gyan (1991) share similar viewpoints about the influence of the fifth Pan-African Congress, asserting

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<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia was a symbolic beacon of African independence and the defeat of colonial forces. It was considered the last frontier for African, and more broadly Black, self-determination. Accordingly, African Americans supported Ethiopians as they fought to stave off Italian invaders in 1935.

that it led the charge for demanding independence. Preceding the Congress, the conclusion of World War II weakened European colonizing nations, especially France and Britain, and revived independence movements across Africa. These factors, along with the young African leaders at the Congress, set the tone for advancing self-determination. Furthermore, Ghana's independence was an influential event that George Padmore (1957, 1971) viewed as the first fruit of the Congress. Ghana's independence helped positively redefine the essence of African Americans' connection to Africa (Meriwether 2002). The impact of these defining events were global, as was the Black Freedom Movement.

Presently, the literature lacks microanalyses of individual relationships and how those informed the interconnected, globalized prism of Black liberation in the twentieth century, as well as explorations of women's roles in this movement. The few works that have analyzed cross-continental friendships of those committed to Black liberation, like Obiwu's "The Pan-African Brotherhood of Langston Hughes and Nnamdi Azikiwe" and Afari-Gyan's "Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore and W.E.B. Du Bois," mention the existing gap in the literature. Notably, the infrequent study and mention of women's contributions to the movement further the erasure of women. Save for Contah's "Forging A New Africa: Black Internationalism and the Council on African Affairs, 1937–1955," women's leadership is particularly under discussed. For example, there is little mention of Mary McLeod Bethune's election as CAA chairperson on April 21, 1948 (NAACP Papers 1948, Part 14). Amy Ashwood Garvey, in her address at the fifth Pan-African Congress, stated that "very much has been written and spoken of the Negro, but for some reason very little has been said about the black woman—she has been shunted into the social background to be a child bearer—this has been principally her lot" (Høgsbjerg 2016). As women were key leaders in the collective movement, more research should acknowledge their contributions so as not to perpetuate their erasure.

### **African Students' Relationships and Experiences at HBCUs**

HBCUs have a long history of educating African students. Since their inception, they have served as sacred, private spaces for Black students to engage with their peers, instructors, and administrators in strategizing for liberation. Race consciousness has been central to HBCUs and has remained a guiding force in the work of HBCU graduates. Despite existing in a white supremacist society, HBCUs have acknowledged the harsh realities of Black people in the US and assembled networks of leaders committed to global racial uplift, serving as formidable grounds for the development of future African and African diasporic leaders.

Attending HBCUs fundamentally shaped African students' political outlook and their understanding of the interconnected global Black liberation struggle. One of the earliest examples was Reverend John Chilembwe, a native of British colonial Nyasaland, or present-day Malawi.<sup>2</sup> Upon graduating from the Virginia Theological College and Seminary, Chilembwe, returned home in 1900. There, he led a historic revolt known as the Chilembwe Uprising of 1915, where the native people rose up against European colonial settlers. Although the uprising was quelled in twelve days with the death of Chilembwe, it left Europeans uneasy about their

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<sup>2</sup> New nations were not born at the pronouncement of independence; rather, existing nations were freed from their colonial oppressors. Throughout this article, former colonial names are only mentioned sparingly because, out of respect, the author prefers to reference these regions by the names they chose for themselves and not the names that are often symbolic of colonial interests in their region.

colonial mission. The native people celebrated Chilembwe's bravery. His commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of colonial masters was heavily informed by his time in Virginia, a state with an extensive history of enslaved peoples' rebellions (Shepperson and Price 1958, 106). As a student, Chilembwe likely heard about rebellions like John Brown's Harpers Ferry of 1859. The Chilembwe Uprising shared similar aims with Brown's Harpers Ferry insofar as both sought to take hold of local armories and kill white people who had helped maintain the people's oppression. As exemplified by Chilembwe, the education of African students at HBCUs informed their anti-colonial advocacy efforts and connected them to African American leaders who themselves were advocating for equal rights recognition.

After graduation, many of these students returned home to lead their nation's independence movements. This was the case of Nkrumah and Azikiwe, who both returned to the African continent after graduating, prepared to continue the struggle for independence from Britain, which had colonized the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, and Nigeria.

Azikiwe attended two HBCUs, Storer College in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia and Howard University in Washington D.C., before graduating from Lincoln University of Pennsylvania in 1930 (Azikiwe 1970, 145). Nkrumah, a protégé and friend of Azikiwe, set his sights on obtaining an American education after he met fellow Ghanaian James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey, a Livingston College graduate (Nkrumah 1957, 15). Yet, it was Azikiwe who encouraged Nkrumah to attend Lincoln University. After graduating from Lincoln, both Azikiwe and Nkrumah taught courses there and maintained contact with Horace Mann Bond, the Lincoln University president. Bond said, in 1947, that Azikiwe was "the justification of a great people struggling to rise from modern slavery; and, unaided, throwing off the chains of economic exploitation and colonialism. He is the justification for humanity itself" (Horace Mann Bond Papers 1947). Nkrumah and Azikiwe marked their place as esteemed alumni when they were bestowed honorary doctorates in law, Nkrumah in 1951 from Lincoln, and Azikiwe in 1954 from Howard (Nkrumah 1957, 157; Azikiwe 1970, 148). Azikiwe also received an honorary doctorate in literature from Storer College, making him one of two people in its history to receive an honorary degree (Burke 2004, 303).

The men knowingly sought education at Lincoln to, as Nkrumah states, return "prepared to serve [their] fellowman" (Clarke 1974, 10). As such, Nkrumah familiarized himself with African American political organizations, including the NAACP, the CAA, the Committee on Africa, and the Committee on African Students. He joined these organizations to better understand how they organized to advance their mission, to inform his efforts upon returning to Ghana (Nkrumah 1957, 45). While a student, Azikiwe wrote for *The Hilltop* and *The Lincolnian*, the school newspapers of Howard and Lincoln University, respectively (Azikiwe 1965, 2). He became involved with the Black press and became a *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Philadelphia Tribune* correspondent. Additionally, some of his articles were published in *The Crisis*, the NAACP's official magazine (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1960). On his coursework, Azikiwe asserted that his "studies in political science gave [him] the necessary background for [his] life's work" (1970, 117). In particular, he referenced Professor Tunnell's political science class, where he "learned from him the need to organize resistance to political misrule" and that "freedom was a universal gift [and] a birthright of humanity of which the Negro was a co-inheritor" (1970, 117). This belief that no race was inferior and that people were equally deserving of the same rights helped deconstruct for Azikiwe the paternalist defense of colonial rule, which suggested colonized Africans were incapable of ruling themselves. The skills and insights Nkrumah and Azikiwe developed in the US aided them in the anti-colonial struggle. Azikiwe, following a brief stint in

Ghana as the founding editor of the *African Morning Post*, returned to Nigeria and founded the *West African Pilot*, a daily anticolonial newspaper that sparked nationalist sentiment. The two men's HBCU experiences equipped them with the skills necessary to realize independence; however, their experiences beyond the campus exposed them directly to the ills of racism in the US.

In his autobiography, Nkrumah recounts routinely experiencing racial segregation in public spaces. He specifically details a time when he travelled below the Mason-Dixon line and was refused water in Baltimore (1957, 42). Even after enduring racially segregated spaces, the aforementioned encounter struck him as particularly dehumanizing. He also learned about the Black experience in the US by preaching at African American churches and conducting a research project, commissioned by the Presbyterian Church, on Black life in Philadelphia. As part of this project, he conversed with hundreds of Black community members. He said that this research exposed him to the African American community in Philadelphia and to racism in the US (Nkrumah 1957, 42).

While in the US, they developed relationships with people who shared their vision for Black liberation. Azikiwe became friends with Simeon Bankole Wright of Sierra Leone and Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse, later George Padmore, of Trinidad. As Nkrumah was learning about the interconnected global plight of Black people, he also maintained a keen interest in events taking place in Africa. Eventually, in 1945, he would serve as a joint secretary of the fifth Pan-African Congress alongside his friend George Padmore. It was there that he engaged with W.E.B. Du Bois, the widely acclaimed father of modern Pan-Africanism, an ideology and “belief that people of African descent have common interests and should be unified” (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1963).

### **The 1945 Fifth Pan-African Congress**

The 1945 Pan-African Congress galvanized support for Black self-determination and placed emphasis on the immediate realization of independence for colonized African people. The Congress brought together leaders from Africa and the diaspora and cemented the foundation of a global Black solidarity network. This Congress was the most politically significant one, primarily because it occurred after World War II, a war that reinvigorated calls for independence and equal rights for Black people. Upon arrival, delegates were greeted by the flags of Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia, the only independent Black nations at the time (Working Class Movement Library 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester). Independence was in the air as African and African American delegates worked with the reference point of their neighbor's independence in mind.

The sheer number of countries and organizations represented heightened the importance of the Congress. Padmore described it as “the largest and most representative Congress yet convened” (1957, 148–49). There were more African countries represented at this Congress than ever before, although they were all Anglophone. In attendance were Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Hasting Banda of Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), Kwame Nkrumah of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), and I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson of Sierra Leone.

Most notably, the Congress ushered in a new generation of young leaders, namely Nkrumah, Kenyatta, and Padmore, who served on the Congress's committees. There was a shift from the predominantly African American leadership of past years to include younger African and African diasporic leaders. Their presence and ongoing engagement with the decolonizing efforts in their respective countries fostered a sense of urgency to obtain independence for colonized

African people at all costs. They were not interested in negotiating for gradual independence or a semi-autonomous state; their aim was to lead the charge for immediate independence. In fact, shortly before the Congress began, the Pan-African Federation in Britain, whose leaders helped organize the Congress, wrote a stern letter dated September 1945 to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, calling imperialism evil and demanding the immediate right to self-determination for colonized people (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1945).

Effectively, this conference linked the struggles of all Black people to a common oppressor—white people of European origin who maintain racist systems, like colonialism and Jim Crow, which denied Black people their human rights. Thus, the victories of one movement were not isolated from the global vision of Black self-determination. Independence from colonial rule was first realized under Nkrumah's leadership when Ghana gained its independence on March 6, 1957.

### **An Influential Cross-Continental Event**

Ghana's independence was celebrated by Ghanaians and Black people globally as a momentous feat toward collective liberation. Ghana's independence fueled allied movements in Africa as well as the US Civil Rights Movement. At the 1958 AAPC, Nkrumah said to African leaders, "now you've seen an independent state...go on and free your part of Africa" (Shepperson 2008, 51). Similarly, African Americans like Martin Luther King Jr. referenced the success of the Ghanaian independence movement in speeches to re-energize the spirit for civil rights and racial equality. In "The Birth of a New Nation," Dr. King emphasized that, like Ghanaians, African Americans had to exercise persistent resistance against unjust systems in their civil rights fight. He told his audience, "Ghana has something to say to us. It says to us first that the oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it."

The continued coverage of Ghanaian independence by the Black press in the US heightened African Americans' awareness of the feats of African anti-colonial movements. Ghana's independence led African Americans to reexamine their relationship to the African continent (Meriwether 2002, 8). Rather than being cast away, Africa was now centered as a source of pride and hope.

### **The Council on African Affairs**

Many African American scholars and activists of the period saw themselves as working in partnership with African people toward a shared goal of Black liberation. This spirit of collective liberation was the essence of the CAA, originally co-founded in 1937 by Paul Robeson and Max Yergan as the International Committee on African Affairs (ICAA). The organization's initial purpose was to educate the American public about the events in Africa, from the perspective of Africans (Von Eschen 1997, 18). The CAA fulfilled its purpose primarily with its monthly publication entitled *New Africa*. Following a restructuring in the 1940s, the CAA diversified its advocacy efforts to include fundraising, lobbying, and campaigning in support of African self-determination (Von Eschen 1997, 20). The publication was widely distributed among a readership that included universities, civic organizations, and African American newspapers. Its articles also appeared in many mainstream publications for which Alphaeus Hunton, *New Africa's* longtime editor, served as a correspondent (Conteh 2016, 35). *New Africa* was a pioneering US-based publication that centered African voices and not the narratives of colonializing oppressors commonly propagated by mainstream media. It regularly cited African-

based newspapers like Azikiwe's *West African Pilot*, and Hunton, through his friendships with African leaders like Azikiwe, Nkrumah, and Kenyatta, kept abreast of the latest developments in their independence movements (Conteh 2016, 33). *New Africa* kept its readers informed about African independence movements and served as an eminent platform for Africans to share their perspectives with a broader audience.

However, the publication's solidarity with African independence advocates and critique of the colonial project made it a target of colonizing nations struggling to maintain hold of the regions they colonized and thwart the growing independence movement. Consequently, *New Africa* was banned in Kenya, the Belgian Congo, and South Africa (Sherwood and Adi 2003, 91). *New Africa* supported the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army (KAU), or the Mau Mau, unlike mainstream media. Its alignment with the KAU's ideals led to a critique of the NAACP in the article "The NAACP Convention and the Question of African Freedom," which asserted that the NAACP was not an outward supporter of African liberation (Conteh 2016, 57). *New Africa's* articles contextualized the KAU's cause, citing that its actions were in response to the violence endured under British colonization. The publication's support continued even as the colonial administration imposed a state of emergency in 1952, in which the rule of law was suspended and suspected KAU members were arrested en masse.

*New Africa's* amplification of independence movements was not uncritical of African leaders, nor did it only amplify the political elite. In fact, it sometimes targeted people with whom the editor and other CAA board members had close relations. In a few instances, namely the damming of the Volta River and the increased taxation on cocoa farmers in Ghana's Ashanti region, its articles condemned Hunton's longtime friend Nkrumah's actions (Conteh 2016, 55–56), expressing concern that Nkrumah was not working in the best interest of Ghanaians and African self-determination. However, there were moments when its amplification of African figures led the publication to side with a gradual realization of independence of African countries, as opposed to an immediate declaration of independence from colonizing countries. Over time, the publication shifted its position to advocate for the immediate declaration of independence (Conteh 2016, 44).

The CAA's support was not restricted to *New Africa*. Equally as important were the conferences and fundraisers held to support movements in Africa. The CAA's 1944 conference "Africa—New Perspectives" was attended by Nkrumah, a then-Lincoln University student and member of the African Students Association (Sherwood and Adi 2003, 91). The conference was held in collaboration with ten sponsors including the African Students Association, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and the First Episcopal District AME Church in Pennsylvania (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1944). The CAA also held rallies and fundraisers to support movements in Africa. In 1946, they hosted "Help Africa Day" and raised \$5,000 and collected 22,000 cans of food. Of this, the CAA donated the food and \$1,700 to help South Africans combat famine (Conteh 2016, 50). Additionally, it launched a fundraising campaign on April 24, 1954 to support Kenyans facing rights abuse under British colonial forces (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1954). The CAA's relentless support of colonized African nations made it the leading organization in the African American solidarity campaign for decolonization.

### **The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**

The NAACP, unlike the CAA, was primarily concerned with the domestic plight of African Americans. However, at the urging of internal actors like W.E.B. Du Bois and Channing H. Tobias, who were more closely aligned with African independence movements, the organization



publicly acknowledged the interconnectedness of racialized systems of oppression that maintained the second-class conditions of Africans and African Americans. At the NAACP's board of directors meeting on December 9, 1946, in a discussion concerning Director of Special Research Du Bois's memorandum calling for the organization to produce pamphlets about the situation on the African continent, both Du Bois and Tobias urged the board to advocate alongside African people and oppose colonialism. Tobias asserted, "we cannot be ignorant of what is going on in Africa" (NAACP Papers 1946, Part 16). It is evident that the NAACP recognized the freedom struggle across Africa, yet its actions in solidarity with Africans were not at the top of its agenda. This is not to say the organization was reluctant; in fact, it was a willing supporter of Africans' struggles, although it rarely initiated any action. Nevertheless, the NAACP did recognize the linkages that connected the domestic predicament of African Americans to the international condition of Africans under colonial regimes. This staged the backdrop for its support of anti-colonial movements in the 1930s and 1940s, primarily through government lobbying, that is, until the Cold War and the growing suspicion of communism led the organization to distance itself from the African cause.

As early as 1930, *The Crisis* asserted the NAACP's belief that the strife of African Americans was only a portion of the global anti-Blackness that perpetuated the oppressive systems of colonization afflicting much of Africa (NAACP Papers, *The Crisis* April 1930). In 1941, the NAACP advocated that US President Franklin D. Roosevelt declare that the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms be applied to both African and Asian people, many of whom were colonized (Roark 1971, 257). Roosevelt never submitted to their pleas.

In a speech delivered at Storer College on June 2, 1947, Azikiwe acknowledged Roosevelt's hypocrisy as well as Winston Churchill's refusal to extend four freedoms to colonized people. He defined the Four Freedoms to mean political freedom, social equality, economic security, and religious freedom, saying:

I come from the part of the world where, in spite of our sacrifices in man-power, money and materials so as to destroy Nazism, we are still living under a political system of benevolent despotism. And when we demand to exercise elementary human rights not only are we silenced by our self-appointed ruler, but the outside world seems to close its eyes, stuff its ears, and seal its mouth on the subject of what is to us a righteous cause. In my humble opinion, democracy is the hope of a confused world (1961, 83).

The confusion of democracy that Azikiwe calls attention to here is that its ideals and freedoms were only applicable to Western powers, many of whom were colonizing countries. While the exclusion of colonized people maintained the brutality of the colonial system, it also further dehumanized colonized nations by maintaining them as undeserving of human rights. In spite of this, the NAACP continued to lobby US government officials to oppose colonization.

At the height of the NAACP's support for African independence movements in the 1940s, after World War II, Walter White, the NAACP's executive secretary, stated, "World War II has given to the Negro a sense of kinship with other colored—and also oppressed—peoples of the world" (Von Eschen 1997, 7). Following the war, there was increased coverage of the continent's events in *The Crisis*, and the NAACP hired Du Bois as director of special research in 1944 and continued to advocate for the US government to support the anticolonial movements. White, unlike Du Bois, believed he could leverage his connections with government officials and single-handedly, under the auspices of the NAACP, curb US foreign policy to support decolonization across Africa. However, he was repeatedly met with resistance and soon realized

the US was closely allied with Britain and France, the two prominent colonizing powers in Africa, and would not go against its allies' desire to keep hold of the countries they had colonized (Janken 2003, 300). Further, US President Truman's vested self-interest in keeping hold of the Italian American vote informed the US's willingness to support Italy's attempts to recolonize Libya and Eritrea (Janken 2003, 311). The US was not only silent on the oppression of colonized people, it was ready to endorse colonization if it helped to maintain its alliances, and it even sought to suppress those who criticized its position or advocated for decolonization. An early target of the US government's silencing campaign was Walter White, who had been vocal about his dismay. Chester Williams, the public liaison officer of the US Mission to the United Nations, threatened to terminate White's access to high-powered government officials by restricting his access to closed door meetings if he continued to critique US foreign policy (Janken 2003, 30). Ultimately, White decided to stop critiquing the US's endorsement of colonization to maintain his close connections, which, he calculated, would be crucial to the African American cause in the Jim Crow era. Considering the detrimental effects that its continued anti-colonial activism would have on its domestic aims for racial uplift, the NAACP decided to step away from anti-colonial efforts to focus on domestic concerns. Du Bois's dismissal as the director of special research in 1948 marked this shift. To prove its loyalty, the NAACP embraced the Truman administration's foreign policy agenda, parts of which were harmful to the African cause, as the US and its allies feared the independence of those nations would present a new front for communism to take hold.

### **Nkrumah and Azikiwe's Relationships with African American Leaders**

While there was a shift in the relationship between African Americans and Africans following the disbandment of the CAA and the NAACP's departure from anti-colonial efforts, individual relationships between Africans and African Americans did not wither. In particular, the friendships of Azikiwe and Nkrumah proved mutually beneficial. Their African American and diasporic friends helped amplify their cause, attended their Independence Day celebrations, and held positions in their country's governments upon independence. Nkrumah and Azikiwe accommodated those who relocated to their respective countries and popularized the work of their African American friends. The remaining parts of this section analyze four of these dynamic relationships: between Azikiwe and Langston Hughes, Azikiwe and W.E.B. Du Bois, Nkrumah and Du Bois, and Nkrumah and George Padmore.

Azikiwe's relationship with Hughes is best defined as a Pan-African brotherhood (Obiwu 2007). The two Lincoln University alumni were close friends for over three decades. They bonded over their Pan-Africanist views, love for Black literature, and celebration of racial pride. Their friendship inspired their work—Langston Hughes wrote "Azikiwe in Jail" following Azikiwe's arrest in Ghana on seditious libel charges for publishing "Has the African a God?" in the *African Morning Post* (Obiwu 2007, 156). Furthermore, in Hughes's piece "Cultural Exchange," he paid homage to African leaders like Nkrumah, Ahmed Sékou Touré (*Guinea*), and Azikiwe (Obiwu 2007, 157). Azikiwe popularized Hughes's work in Nigeria when he published his pieces in *The West African Pilot*, and when he quoted Hughes's *Youth* poem in his inaugural speech as Nigeria's Governor-General in 1960, a celebration that marked the realization of the Pan-Africanist freedom that Azikiwe and Hughes shared (Obiwu 2007, 159).

Azikiwe's inauguration presented an opportune time to praise those he admired. Accordingly, upon introducing Du Bois at a state luncheon, he reverently called Du Bois "the cornerstone of African freedom" (Miller 2018, 30). Azikiwe's relationship with Du Bois began

when Du Bois, then editor of *The Crisis*, published several of Azikiwe's pieces. From then on, the two continued to support one another's efforts. Azikiwe, then president of the National Council of Nigeria, in a 1946 message to Du Bois, pledged his organization's support of the Pan-African Congress's petition to the United Nations advocating for decolonization (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1946). Even upon Du Bois's death, his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, remained engaged in Nigeria's political developments and congratulated Azikiwe in 1963 when the Federation of Nigeria was declared (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1963).

Du Bois was also close to Nkrumah and maintained communication with him following the Congress, where the two had worked together. Upon the release of Nkrumah's first book in 1957, *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, Du Bois reviewed it in a speech, reporting that the book had stirred his imagination more than any book he had read in the last decade (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1957). Nkrumah invited Du Bois and his wife to attend Ghana's Independence celebrations, but the couple were denied passports and were unable to attend. However, in 1961, Nkrumah brought Du Bois to Ghana and helped him realize his dream of compiling an encyclopedia Africana. Upon arrival, Du Bois received a house, courtesy of the Ghanaian government (Afari-Gyan 1991, 8). Nkrumah even approved a graduate student from the Achimota School to work alongside him. Du Bois would spend the final years of his life in Ghana, passing away at the age of 95 shortly after receiving his Ghanaian citizenship in 1963. Much can be said of Nkrumah's and Du Bois's relationship, however, at its essence were mutual respect and admiration for the tenacity and work of the other. To Du Bois, Nkrumah was the "voice of Africa" (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1960), while for Nkrumah, Du Bois was a fatherlike figure and "a great son of Africa" (W.E.B. Du Bois Papers 1963).

In close proximity to the final resting place of W.E.B. and Shirley Du Bois in Ghana lies George Padmore, another beloved friend of Nkrumah. Padmore was like a brother to him, and Nkrumah called their friendship rare because of their like-mindedness and instant affinity to one another (Afari-Gyan 1991, 3). Padmore, a longtime communist, broke with the Soviet Union in 1934 after it refused to aid Ethiopian efforts against the Italian invasion. He surmised that it was not concerned with the independence of African people (Afari-Gyan 1991, 2). As such, he embraced a Pan-African perspective that sought liberation for African people by African people. It was after his ideological rebirth that he and Nkrumah served as joint secretaries for the Congress. From there, Padmore became Nkrumah's trusted advisor. After independence, Nkrumah appointed Padmore as Ghana's special adviser on African affairs. However, not everyone supported his appointment, with some citing that West Indians were already sufficiently represented in senior positions; others disliked how much influence he had, and still others thought of him as an outsider (Afari-Gyan 1991, 4; Tunteng 1974, 41). Nonetheless, Padmore served for two years before his untimely death in London. His ashes were flown to Ghana to be buried. As special adviser, Padmore organized the AAPC, bringing together representatives from across Africa to work for independence in their countries.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the cross-continental experiences and relationships of Nkrumah and Azikiwe were influential to their attainment, in part, of independence for their respective countries. Similarly, the realization of independence across Africa, specifically Ghana, encouraged the US civil rights movement. Both groups united to advance the collective cause of Black liberation, which required that all Black people, regardless of geography, be free from racial oppression. Nkrumah and Azikiwe were informed by their time in the US, particularly by their experience at HBCUs,

where they began building solidarity networks with African Americans and were exposed to the NAACP and the CAA. Following World War II, the fifth Pan-African Congress set the course for the immediate realization of independence, an aim that Nkrumah's country, Ghana, would realize in 1957. Shortly after, in 1960, Nigeria, Azikiwe's country, declared its independence from Britain.

In the US, amid the Cold War, the anti-colonial solidarity campaigns by the NAACP and the CAA were silenced under pressure from the government to stamp out critics of American foreign policy and those accused of having communist ties. Although these organizations responded by distancing themselves from the African cause, the individual relationships between African and African American leaders remained. The relationships of these leaders epitomize the ties between Africans and African Americans in the struggle for global Black self-determination.

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## **The Green Belt Movement: Women, Land, and Development**

**Kyende Kinoti**

### **ABSTRACT**

Environmental degradation is one of the most prevalent and devastating issues in our contemporary world. As discourses on how to curb increasing environmental deterioration continue to emerge, it has become clear that the Earth's ecosystems cannot thrive in tandem with hyper-modernization projects pursuing Western conceptions of development. As the ramifications of environmental degradation become more apparent in our daily lives, it is also evident that Southern women are disproportionately affected by ills brought about by the destruction of ecosystems. In light of our current gendered environmental crisis, this article offers a historical exploration of how the Green Belt Movement (GBM)—an organization founded in Kenya in 1977—engaged in programs and advocacy to empower rural women and conserve the environment. The GBM's activities were particularly groundbreaking due to their occurrence at a time when conversations surrounding environmental protection were not mainstream and took the backseat to development goals evoked by modernization theory. To contextualize the GBM's emergence, the article explores how agrarian policies in colonial and post-colonial Kenya led to deforestation and natural resource depletion. The article then offers gender and development (GAD) and intersectionality literature as ways to better understand the GBM's interventions to restore natural habitats. The GBM's tree planting, education, and advocacy programs are underlined as being instrumental in encouraging authentic design within communities, challenging hyper-modernization in Kenya, and shifting rural women's gender roles. The article ultimately aims to highlight the importance of indigenous knowledge and local activism in creating a sustainable future.

Keywords: gender and development, intersectionality, environmental degradation, conservation, Kenya

### **Introduction**

The Green Belt Movement (GBM) is an organization and social movement based in Kenya aiming to empower women and conserve the environment. The organization was founded in 1977 by Wangari Maathai in response to challenges that rural Kenyan women were facing concerning food, water, and firewood insecurity. This article explores—from a historical perspective—how the GBM applied a gendered and intersectional lens to its efforts in women's empowerment, environmental conservation, and poverty alleviation.<sup>1</sup> The article argues that the

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize that gender is a wide spectrum. For this article, I focus on women and men as most of the relevant research highlights these two genders, and as the GBM focuses on women.

GBM expanded women's agency through an intersectional and gendered approach while promoting environmental protection and challenging Kenya's hyper-modernization agenda.

This article includes five sections informed by primary and secondary resources. Section one looks at how gender determines how people are affected by environmentally deteriorating development projects. It also examines intersectionality literature, specifically how intersections of gender, socio-economic class, and locality generate varying consequences in people's lives from environmental changes. Section two contextualizes land and agrarian policies in colonial Kenya and how these policies began shaping how land was perceived with regard to economic production. Section three investigates how modernization policies in early independent Kenya led to environmental degradation and deforestation. Section four explores the GBM's gendered and intersectional activism toward supporting rural women and environmental conservation. It showcases how the movement encouraged authentic design within communities, challenged hyper-modernization, and shifted women's gender roles. Section five highlights core insights from the article's analysis and the importance of studying the GBM from the perspectives of gender and development (GAD) and intersectionality.

### **Analytical Framework: Gender, Intersectionality, and Environmental Degradation**

This section offers a literature review to understand Southern women's historical relationship with modernization and the environment. Throughout this article, modernization will refer to tenets invoked by modernization theory and its progressive linear model for development. These tenets are industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, bureaucracy, mass consumption, and Western democracy (Crossman 2019). In its engagement with literature on GAD and intersectionality, this section looks at how socio-economic class, geography, and gender intersect to generate varying effects from modernization's environmental impact. The literature provides a framework to better articulate the GBM's interventions in the plights of rural women experiencing ramifications of environmental degradation.

GAD is a framework calling for development approaches to consider socially constructed differences between men and women and how development policies and practices yield different results for each gender (Reeves and Baden 2000). GAD emphasizes that labor, resources, and consumption levels are not distributed in an undifferentiated and equitable manner within households (Miller and Razavi 1995). Rather, GAD considers how gender roles and social relationships between genders inform the effects of modernization on a particular group (Miller and Razavi 1995). GAD does not focus on women's issues in isolation; instead, it looks at the relational circumstances contributing to socio-economic and political disparities between genders. Taking environmental degradation as an example, the tendency is to view its repercussions as nondiscriminatory, however, its outcomes vary across demographics due to the living systems affected. Anesu Makina and Theresa Moyo (2016) assert that environmental degradation produces gendered consequences in Africa. The authors attribute this to "men and women interact[ing] with the environment differently due to their varied needs and roles. Women, for instance, are responsible for water collection so they are impacted more by changes in river flows" (Makina and Moyo 2016, 1187). They assert that while men and women are impacted differently by environmental degradation, women are negatively affected to a greater extent—for example, by the 2000s deforestation that forced Tanzanian women to walk farther for firewood and pushed Cameroonian women who farm for the family into less fertile lands (Makina and Moyo 2016; Fonjong 2008; Misana 1999). Therefore, development projects in Africa contributing to environmental degradation demonstrate an absence of GAD consideration

because socially constructed norms mean women often experience disproportionate repercussions.

GAD literature also analyses how colonialism, as a capital accumulating and modernizing process, dispossessed women from their “means of livelihood” and how the colonial legacy continued to affect women following independence in Southern nations (Beneria, Berik, and Floro 2015, 12). GAD thinkers problematize Western dominance in development discourse and the universalization of Western modernization theory (Beneria, Berik, and Floro 2015). Consequences of capital accumulation based on a Western development model that does not consider GAD were illustrated in Mozambique, where farmers and inhabitants were relocated to new settlements after land grabs for agricultural production by corporations in 2009. Verma writes,

new settlements were on marginal lands where women’s workloads in agriculture and soil fertility increased, as did their household work because distances from homes to fields and water sources were greater than before. As women reported, there was a decrease in food security, livelihood options, and incomes (2014, 58).

This portrays how modernization projects like large-scale monocropping can produce negative gendered outcomes for women (Verma 2014). Mozambican women were more susceptible to the ills of land grabbing since their gender roles necessitated that they generate livelihood from the land, yet compensation efforts only recognized male tenure (Verma 2014). Although modernization is perceived to bring universal net benefits, even if benefits are distributed unequally across demographics, the reality remains that it can cause harm to vulnerable populations—in this case, women.

GAD thinkers problematize the universalization of Western ideas on women’s empowerment (Beneria, Berik, and Floro 2015). As the dominance of Western feminism has become increasingly challenged, intersectionality has played an important role when designing systems for the varied needs of non-Western societies. “Intersectionality,” coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), represents a framework for studying how a person’s differing identities intersect to generate distinctive experiences of privilege and discrimination. While intersectionality was introduced to problematize white feminism—particularly how it centers white middle-class women’s experiences in the feminist movement (Crenshaw 1989)—discourses have expanded to include Southern women’s experiences and their interactions with Western feminism (hooks 2000). Chandra Mohanty (1988) explores how colonialism’s cultural production of a “Third World” created a byproduct of “Third World Women” that depicted these women as a homogenous group of victims oppressed by a common patriarchal system. Homogenizing Southern women negates their differing goals and needs, and ignores their agency (Mohanty 1988). Regarding environmental deterioration discourse, Makina and Moyo contend that “focusing exclusively on vulnerability detracts attention from the ways in which women actively engage in environmental management (Arora-Jonsson 2011). It is also important to avoid portraying women from one region of the global South as representative of the entire global South female population” (2016, 1190). The authors caution against viewing Southern women as monolithic or considering them as sharing similar problems and thus as requiring similar solutions. They problematize narratives of Southern women as passive victims, alluding to the importance of sharing stories featuring women’s agency. Similar to Makina and Moyo’s (2016) sentiments, intersectional and transnational feminists warn against essentializing Western liberation and development structures (Kurtiş and Adams 2015). Rather, intersectional feminists



advocate for allowing Southern women's complexities and truths to guide their feminism (Beneria, Berik, and Floro 2016).

The GAD framework helps us understand the gendered effects of modernization projects that result in environmental degradation, a perspective pivotal for framing the GBM's work. Intersectionality illustrates the importance of not centering particular experiences or worldviews in a social movement. Intersectionality literature brings an understanding of what has historically informed the GBM's activities. Since its inception in 1977, the GBM's work on women's empowerment and environmental conservation in rural Kenya has lain at the intersection of gender, socio-economic status, and locality. It has focused on poor rural women in Kenya due to their distinct experiences with environmental degradation resulting from development projects. Using these frameworks, the next section examines how the movement effected positive social change for women.

### **British Land and Agrarian Policies in Colonial Kenya**

To understand the widespread environmental degradation that prompted the GBM's rise, one must first recognize the role of British land and agrarian policies in colonial Kenya as antecedents to post-colonial Kenya's hyper-modernization projects. This section will examine the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance and the 1954 "Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya," two documents influential in determining agrarian and land tenure policies in colonial Kenya. The section concludes with an analysis of these policies' gendered effects.

#### ***1902 Crown Lands Ordinance***

British government land policies in Kenya's Highlands promoted the notion that land productivity was synonymous with agricultural production. By the early 1900s, the British government had begun encouraging Europeans to settle in Kenya following the completion of the Uganda railway—a railway project in the British protectorate of East Africa connecting Kenya and Uganda's inland areas to the coast (Harbeson 1971). Given the railway completion in 1901, Sir Henry Johnston asserted the following regarding Highlands surrounding the Rift Valley:

here we have a territory admirably suited for a white man's country, and I can say this, with no thought of injustice to any native race, for the country in question is either utterly uninhabited for miles and miles or at most its inhabitants are wandering hunters who have no settled home, or whose fixed habitation is the lands outside the healthy area (Morgan 1963, 140).

Johnston argued that land used by pastoralists or without permanent settlements should be considered *terra nullius*.<sup>2</sup> Johnston's sentiment was not particularly new; the "white man's country" idea was already prevailing in the East Africa Protectorate and supported by political figureheads such as Sir Charles Eliot, the commissioner from 1901 to 1904 (Coldham 1979). By

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<sup>2</sup> *Terra nullius* defines land perceived as "nobody's land" because it is deemed unoccupied or uninhabited. This concept has often been used to justify imperial territorial acquisition.

1902, a Crown Lands Ordinance granting European settlers Crown land in the highlands for agricultural purposes had been put into effect (Kenya Government 1915). The 1902 ordinance was followed by a series of orders, ordinances, and pledges up to the Second World War that further established European settlement in the region to create a “racially exclusive European farming area” (Harbeson 1971, 232) that “came to be known as the ‘White Highlands’” (Harbeson 1971, 232). The “White Highlands” designation rested on the belief that non-agrarian land was unproductive, and therefore should be granted to those willing to farm—specifically, Europeans. The British government justified large-scale land acquisitions in the “White Highlands” using the *terra nullius* argument, by contending that they were not interfering with African settlements. The “uninhabited land” notion proposed by the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance began to set legal and ideological foundations for land grabbing both in colonial and post-colonial Kenya and influenced how post-colonial Kenya came to define “idle land” and modernization.

### ***The Swynnerton Plan***

The 1954 “Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya” continued to link land productively to agrarian activities and marked the beginning of bureaucratizing land tenure for Africans. This plan, known as the “Swynnerton Plan” after R. J. M. Swynnerton, the then assistant director of agriculture, came at a time when much had changed in the British colony of Kenya. World War II’s aftermath and the Mau Mau uprising prompted the British government to look toward reviving their economy and subduing anti-colonialists (Harbeson 1971). The Swynnerton Plan was an agricultural policy put forward to increase economic production in Kenya and reward Africans who aligned with the colonial government. The plan, similar to the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance, promoted using land for large-scale agricultural production, however, it did so under the banner of promoting economic modernization. The plan outlined that land was to be consolidated and further subdivisions were to be interdicted; land was to be enclosed and registered for freehold tenure; and the British government was to encourage a selection of Africans to take up individual land titles and cultivate cash crops by providing them with agricultural extension and access to credit (Francis and Williams 1993; Harbeson 1971; S. M. Kariuki 2004). One consequence was that “modernization meant that land assumed the status of a productive asset rather than remain[ing] simply a source of social and psychological security” (Harbeson 1971, 239). The Swynnerton Plan’s measures failed to solve land contests within African communities, instead creating opportunities for land grabbing. Elizabeth Francis and Gavin Williams write that “the very process of registration gave rise to conflicts and to preemptive measures by those with knowledge of the registration procedures [under both customary and common law] to establish claims to uncultivated land” (1993, 389). This land commodifying worldview prevailed in post-colonial Kenya, where leaders put forward policies showing disdain for so-called “idle land”—a perspective that facilitated land grabbing.

### ***Gendered Consequences of British Land Tenure and Agrarian Policies***

Colonial land tenure policies neglected to recognize women’s complex relationship with land and weakened women’s rights to land. Before colonial rule, women’s access to land mainly came through marriage, since husbands were required to provide land to their wives, whereas unmarried women mainly accessed land through small sections carved out for them by their fathers or through their mothers’ land access (Karanja 1991). Yet, women had significant

influence over land because customary land tenure featured a low hierarchy; although land rights were patrilineal, “individual male control over the land was not allodial [and] the outright sale of land was not practiced” (Mackenzie 1991, 230). Furthermore, women enjoyed “security of tenure” and “usufruct” due to their gender role as primary agriculturalists; women had the freedom to make decisions about crops being cultivated, surplus production, and product exchange (Mackenzie 1991, 230). Despite women’s historical dependence on land for livelihood, land consolidation processes and land titling introduced by the British only recognized male owners’ rights to land (Francis and Williams 1993). Women’s alienation from land was compounded by colonial agrarian policies that undermined women’s agricultural knowledge. Traditionally, women maintained soil fertility and prevented soil erosion through “rotational bush fallowing” and “intercropping” (Mackenzie 1991, 231), however, British agricultural policies promoting cash crops and monocultures gave rise to soil erosion (Mackenzie 1991, 233). Increased soil erosion led to a British soil conservation campaign that constrained women to forced labor to build bench terraces—stair-like earth strips built on sloping land to conserve water and soil—and ignored their experiential soil conservation knowledge (Mackenzie 1991). Women ended up bearing the brunt of the environmental consequences caused by agrarian practices centered on hyper-modernization. Nevertheless, women resisted land dispossession “using both formal and informal procedures, despite their biases against women, to purchase land individually and collectively to secure rights to land for themselves, and for their daughters” (Francis and Williams 1993, 389). Women also resisted environmental degradation’s disproportional gendered effects by rebelling against being forced to labor by the British (Francis and Williams 1993). Colonial land titling and monocropping offer examples of how British agrarian and land tenure policies marginalized African women. Yet, women demonstrated agency by advocating and building solutions for themselves.

### **Kenya’s Post-Colonial Development Agenda**

Following decolonization, the Kenyan government embarked on a mission to modernize the nation. An important document for unraveling post-colonial modernization policies is the 1965 sessional paper by Tom Mboya. This section explores the modernization goals highlighted in Mboya’s paper to help explain the epoch’s ideologies surrounding land. It examines how post-colonial Kenya’s ideologies on land productivity—in tandem with colonial legacies—contributed to land grabbing, deforestation, and the disenfranchisement of women from access to land.

### ***Modernization Policies and Land Grabbing***

Development in post-colonial Kenya invoked tenets of modernization theory such as industrialization and making resources deemed to be “idle” productive. Tom Mboya—minister of economic planning in Kenya in 1965—wrote a sessional paper titled “African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya” that formed the foundation of how development was approached in the wake of Kenyan independence. Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton argue that President Jomo Kenyatta’s and Tom Mboya’s conception of African socialism asserted that, “community, because it was natural and therefore amenable to another form of content, should become a necessary part of capitalist development” (1996, 297). This illustrates that there was no real opposition to capitalism in newly independent Kenya; rather, the aim was to position community as a means to capitalistic end goals such as modernization. Mboya writes, “we want

to grow rapidly; to transform the economy from a subsistence to a market economy, to develop our land and introduce modern agricultural methods; to industrialize” (1965, 25). This illustrates that the concepts of development and modernization were linked to the idea of industrialization, and land’s purpose was seen as economic production. Mboya writes, “allowing land to lie idle and undeveloped, misusing the nation’s limited resources, and conspicuous consumption when the nation needs savings are examples of anti-social behavior that African Socialism will not countenance” (1965, 5). This conveys disdain for land not used for modern agriculture or industrialization. There were steep penalties for those who did not comply with this agenda, especially with regard to agriculture: “those few who refuse to co-operate in a major co-operative farming scheme are made to do so or lose their land” (Mboya 1965, 38). This statement portrays how little room was left for communities to determine their development goals, and simultaneously sets the scene for land dispossessions. Land-grabbing by local elites was widespread in independent Kenya. After independence, most Kenyan land “fell under the categories of government (former Crown lands) and trust land (from the ‘native reserves’)...[and was] highly open to directives from the president” (Klopp and Lumumba 2014, 58). Effectively, land grabbed by the Crown during colonialism remained alienated land. Despite procedures to redistribute land, political elites capitalized on their policy knowledge and proximity to power to unlawfully allocate land to themselves and their supporters (F. Kariuki and Ng’etich 2016). The rampant land grabbing that ensued in Kenya was a key focus for the GBM, and much of their advocacy aimed to curtail unlawful land acquisitions, particularly those leading to deforestation.

### ***State Deforestation in Kenya***

The sessional paper was an antecedent of future deforestation in Kenya to make way for agricultural production. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in Kenya asserts that “forest excision for farm settlement” was a major contributor to deforestation (2016, 1). Peter Wass similarly states that as of 1993, “the transfer of forest estate land to non-protected status (210 000 ha) therefore amounts to almost 13% of Kenya’s total gazetted Forest Reserves (1.64 million ha). Most of this land had been excised for agricultural purposes” (1995, 16). The figures for these excisions include those from the colonial period, hence deforestation in post-colonial Kenya resulted from the push of colonial and post-colonial administrations for agricultural modernization. Although not all excised land was used for farm settlement, the figures illustrate growing deforestation in Kenyan forests. As an example, indigenous forest cover in Kenya’s Mount Elgon region “declined by a third from 53,281 hectares (49% of the protected area) to 35,140 hectares (33% of the protected area)” between 1960 and 1999, with 9,582 of these deforested hectares being used as farmland (Ministry of Environment and Forestry 2018, 39). This environmental degradation is what prompted the GBM to encourage women to plant trees. Through its programs, the GBM pushed back on widespread deforestation for agriculture by asserting that unfelled trees are pivotal to community and ecosystem health.

### ***Gendered Consequences of Post-Colonial Land Tenure and Agrarian Policies***

British land tenure policies had failed to recognize women’s rights to land by excluding them from land titling procedures. Post-colonial Kenya attempted to resolve tenure injustices through a 1967 act requiring all land transactions to consider familial needs before being approved by the Land Control Board (Karanja 1991; Kenya Human Rights Commission 2000). However, through the 1990s, only 5 percent of Kenyan women had land titles under their name, while

approximately 80 percent of agricultural work was done by women (Karanja 1991; Kenya Human Rights Commission 2000). This disparity between women's land ownership and their agrarian labor was due largely to the fact that the Registered Land Act—introduced in 1963 to replace the 1959 colonial Native Land Registration Ordinance—did not offer recourse for women who did not have their name on land titles, yet depended on the land for livelihood (Karanja 1991; Kenya Human Rights Commission 2000). Furthermore, in post-colonial Kenya, women's "lack of awareness of their land rights" (Karanja 1991, 132) was weaponized to lend their male counterparts greater freedom to sell and buy land. Similarly, increasing demand for land and elites' land acquisitions made land ownership financially unattainable for many women (Karanja 1991). Given this reality, the GBM's emergence was instrumental in providing avenues for women to advocate for themselves within the public sphere. Expanding women's agency was a touchstone for the GBM, hence their efforts to educate women on structures depriving them of land and their encouragement for women to advocate for more equitable land access.

### **The Green Belt Movement**

From its inception, the GBM has been a Kenyan organization seeking to empower rural women and conserve the environment. The GBM's work has been, first and foremost, done through a gendered lens, due to the recognition that environmental degradation and food insecurity affect women to a greater extent. In 1977, when the GBM was founded, Kenya was experiencing widespread deforestation to grow cash crops such as tea and coffee (Merton and Dater 2008). Modernization plans resulting in deforestation led to streams drying up, less secure food supply, and firewood and water scarcity (Swanson 2018). These challenges mainly devastated women because gender roles in rural communities tied women's livelihoods to land access. The GBM recognized these issues' gendered nature because it was women who had "to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing" (The Green Belt Movement 2021). It was women who had to walk further to fetch water (Merton and Dater 2008; Kahiu 2010). Moreover, women were in charge of feeding their families and struggled to find food for their children suffering from malnutrition (Merton and Dater 2008; Kahiu 2010). In light of this, the GBM, through its programs, worked to challenge modernization activities that endangered women's rights to, and labor on, land. The organization focused on tree planting and provided civic and environmental education to enlighten women on political and economic contexts affecting their livelihoods. The GBM also engaged in advocacy to challenge policies that resulted in environmental degradation and women's disenfranchisement, ultimately managing to extend women's agency.

### ***Designing from Within***

The GBM pinpointed that problems plaguing rural women were related to environmental destruction, and decided to tackle rural women's issues through environmental conservation. The organization encouraged women to "work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil [and] store rainwater" (The Green Belt Movement 2021). Tree planting allowed rural women to get renewed access to food and firewood, and "receive a small monetary token for their work" (The Green Belt Movement 2021). However, the GBM was not doing the work itself; rather, it was recommending that rural women take up tree-planting initiatives (Maathai 2003; Prévot 2015). Apart from first teaching the women how to plant a tree, the GBM maintained a hands-off approach (Merton and Dater 2008). The GBM had initially decided to provide seedlings, but then decided against it to ensure the women did not become dependent on the organization (Merton

and Dater 2008). Women were encouraged to use their ecosystems knowledge to decide which seedlings were accessible and native to their environment (Muthuki 2006; Muthuki 2011; Hunt 2014; DeLap 2013). In doing so, the GBM promoted indigenous knowledge by supporting indigenous tree planting to promote biodiversity. Although the GBM gave some compensation, it was a small amount, around \$0.40 per surviving tree, given more to create morale than to provide income the women could survive on (Merton and Dater 2008). Their hands-off approach premise was that environmental regeneration would give rural women the resources needed to survive and the capacity to renew those resources. The GBM treated participants as capable agents with the creativity to design approaches that best served their needs. Additionally, it was up to women to reach out to the organization and apply to join the initiative if they deemed it a good fit for their community (Michaelson 1994). This method marked a departure from Western feminism, which has often advocated for outside solutions for local communities and a one-size-fits-all approach. The hands-off approach revived indigenous knowledge systems that had begun to disappear with British agricultural policies, while tree planting gave rural women greater autonomy over their livelihoods through self-sufficiency.

### ***Challenging Hyper-Modernization***

The GBM's poverty alleviation measures diverged from the other poverty reduction projects in Kenya at the time. National approaches to combatting poverty often concerned industrialization, such as emphasizing land use for modern agriculture. As discussed earlier, development projects not done with a GAD consideration negatively affected Kenyan women, and harmful outcomes were exacerbated by the fact that women's land tenure claims were often overlooked. In light of this, the GBM had to address the greater hyper-modernization issue in Kenya to further support rural women. The GBM began to realize that issues of "environmental degradation, deforestation, and food insecurity" were symptoms of root problems caused by power inequalities and a nationwide shift in values (The Green Belt Movement 2021). The organization recognized that colonial legacies of clearing forests and land grabbing for farm settlement were being kept alive by the newly independent Kenyan state (Merton and Dater 2008; Maathai 2009). These realizations marked a turning point for the social movement, which began expanding its work to education and advocacy.

Education and advocacy were essential next steps in empowering the population. Education helped people understand how they came to face the challenges of food, water, and firewood insecurity. The organization began to provide seminars focusing on "civic and environmental education...to encourage individuals to examine why they lacked agency to change their political, economic, and environmental circumstances" (The Green Belt Movement 2021). Even then, seminar facilitators prioritized making space for communities to design systems from within by allowing participants to raise concerns and innovate solutions (Hunt 2014). Seminars allowed communities to become more knowledgeable about systems affecting them. In conjunction with educating about development goals that lead to deforestation and land grabbing, the GBM also gave people an opportunity to act through advocacy. The organization "began to advocate for greater democratic space and more accountability from national leaders. It fought against land grabbing and the encroachment of agriculture into the forests" (The Green Belt Movement 2021). One such advocacy case was in 1989 in response to a plan to build a skyscraper in Nairobi's Uhuru Park (Maathai 2008). Women of the GBM decided to intervene because they saw this project as further government encroachment into public land. The women advocated for the termination of the skyscraper project by sending letters to government

administration and the media and by holding protests (Merton and Dater 2008). Education was significant in their efforts to stop the building. The women of the GBM recognized that the tower was not simply a local issue because the project had received funding from foreign investors. Thus, the GBM sent letters to foreign governments, asking them “why would they do here in Nairobi that which they would never try to do [in] Hyde Park of London or Central Park of New York” (Merton and Dater 2008, 35:55). The letters, protests, and global media attention led to funds being withdrawn for the project and to the park being conserved (Merton and Dater 2008). The Uhuru Park incident showcases how the GBM was challenging prevailing development concepts in Kenya, whereby a park not being used for agriculture or industry was seen as “idle land.” The women’s advocacy to save the park marked an emergence of more highly educated women who knew their rights and who were confident in publicly challenging practices that affected their lives.

### ***Shifting Gender Roles***

The GBM’s interventions were particularly groundbreaking in that they did not look to integrate women into patriarchal norms and they generated a shift in women’s gender roles. Taking education as an example, the rural women that the GBM encountered were often illiterate, since men’s education was often privileged over women’s. Lack of formal education made it difficult to teach technical environmental concepts to rural women and led the Department of Forests to declare, “you need people with diplomas to plant trees” (Hunt 2014, 240). Instead of accepting the norm of women being uneducated or pursuing positivist ways of knowing, the GBM educated rural women using experiential ways of knowing. Rural women’s norms began to shift toward being educated—although informally—and knowledge relevant to their experiences became legitimized within their communities. Another example of shifting gender roles is the GBM’s involvement in expanding women’s agency beyond the private sphere. The initiatives to plant trees, educate communities, and engage in advocacy gave women more ability to assert their demands in the public sphere. Although the women’s efforts were not welcomed by the Kenyan state—resulting in protesting women being sprayed with tear gas and beaten with batons by police, leading to the hospitalization of Wangari Maathai during a nonviolent demonstration in Uhuru Park—women now more readily engaged in public discourse (Hunt 2014). Even with the state attempting to delegitimize the GBM—such as when President Daniel Arap Moi infamously referred to Maathai as a “madwoman” and called the GBM’s activities “subversive”—the women’s initiatives yielded positive results on several occasions (Ighobor 2012). These examples illustrate how the GBM’s work, primarily aimed at helping women assert themselves in their private lives, evolved to give women more agency in public spheres. As women became more politically aware and active, a shift in gender roles began to emerge. The GBM’s programs supported women in taking up public spaces, while keeping women’s empowerment and environmental conservation at the forefront.

### **Conclusion**

This article has raised the issue of modernization projects that lead to environmental destruction and their disproportionate gendered repercussions for women. Colonial and post-colonial administrations in Kenya embraced the narrative that land productivity was synonymous with revenue generation. This fixation with economic production led to agrarian and land tenure policies that resulted in widespread land dispossession and deforestation. The GBM’s

interventions were pivotal in challenging the ills of environmental destruction for profit while expanding the agency of rural women disenfranchised by deforestation, food insecurity, and land grabbing. The GBM employed a GAD approach by problematizing development agendas that did not consider how socially constructed gender norms lead to varying consequences for men and women. The movement also invoked intersectionality by accounting for class differences in Kenya that led to rural women being affected to a greater extent by environmental destruction than urban women. The GBM's promotion of indigenous tree planting, seminars, and advocacy measures allowed women to design systems from within, challenge hyper-modernization, shift their gender roles, and become active agents of change.

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## **The Underlying Role of Christianity in Political and Social Reform During the Civil Rights Movement as Exhibited by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference**

**Amaya Graham**

### **ABSTRACT**

Throughout history, Black churches have been highly esteemed among the Black community and influential in many ways, allowing for the formation of religious-based organizations during the civil rights movement, the ultimate goal of which was political change. A prime example is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), formed in response to the political and social climate of the 1960s. By looking at this organization and its president, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., this article aims to both emphasize and understand the underlying role that Christianity played in the civil rights movement. This is accomplished by looking at Dr. King's philosophies, many of which were derived from the Christian faith, as well as how they were incorporated into the founding principles of the SCLC. The endeavors of the SCLC are also analyzed to build a relationship between the organization's philosophies and practices and their impact on the civil rights movement. Through the successes of their political campaigns and other involvements, the SCLC achieved high status throughout the nation, ultimately accomplishing much for the civil rights movement. Christianity acted as a mediating factor between whites and Blacks, contributing essential, rudimentary ideals to the movement, and the Black church served as a well of resources to keep the SCLC and the movement afloat. This indicates that Christianity was a vital component of the civil rights movement that often gets overlooked.

Keywords: Christianity, civil rights movement, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black church

### **Introduction**

Religion since America's conception has always played a vital role in its politics. The country's very foundation rests on many of the ideologies and principles of the Christian faith as seen in the Constitution itself. Although there is an increasing push to keep church and state separate, it is important to note that religion can have a major influence on an individual's political thought and action. Their personal beliefs can be seen in the ways in which they approach political issues, who they choose to cast their vote for, and the policies they support. Some even argue that separating politics from the religious principles that they were drawn on is damaging as it skews the meaning or intent behind them. Religion, having such complex ties to politics, became a tool to help bring about change in the civil rights era. Many of the messages used to spread hope and ignite change during the civil rights movement were inspired by biblical teachings, and many of the most prominent Black leaders of the movement were Christians who used these values to galvanize support for the issues and injustices plaguing Black Americans.

This article seeks to shed light on the role of Christianity in the civil rights movement. The work and ideologies of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its first president, Martin Luther King, Jr., will be examined to get a sense of how the Christian organization and individual were impactful. Since Dr. King was the original leader of the SCLC and openly discussed and portrayed his Christian faith, he is an ideal figure to study in order to gain insight on the impact of the mingling of religion and politics. He was able to outwardly convey his faith through his ideals, sermons, and speeches, all of which influenced the SCLC. By analyzing both the SCLC's failures and successes through the lens of King's ideology, the lasting impact of the organization can be determined.

### **The Role of the Black Church**

It was not the Christian faith itself that helped to achieve these great feats, but the institutions that supported it. Black churches have served as places of individual refuge as well as collective action for a very long time. They uphold the ideals of the social gospel, which is concerned with those who are poor and oppressed and encourages the church to be involved in every aspect of Black life. Therefore, the Black church has a longtime tradition of encouraging and supporting faith-based social action, social service, and involvement in public policy issues (Smith 2003, 15). In a culture with no separation between private devotion and public duty, the church had to forsake its strictly spiritual role and adopt racial advancement practices within secular regions. The organizing efforts of Black churches have been vital to the success of race-based social movements.

The Black church has had a sort of dual role in society. It has served as both a spiritual home for those who resist the status quo of discrimination and as a refuge from those same harsh realities. It could be classified as a civil society institution, or as part of a third sector that provides a space independent of governmental and business sectors (Smith 2003, 2), a classification necessary given that Blacks were restricted from those other public domains. Essentially, it has been a mediator for negotiating political and economic life. This dual role of the church made it the most qualified and ideal institution for turning the moral issues the Black community faced into a political dialogue to spark social movements. The church was a common institution within Black communities, which also made it a source of resources to sustain mass action.

Throughout history, religious individuals have participated heavily in political issues, such as colonial war and peace disputes, nineteenth-century slavery, prohibition in the 1920s, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. For the civil rights movement, it was the devotion to the social gospel tradition that really ignited the flame for social justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. became a major figure of the movement, and his philosophies heavily influenced many aspects of the quest for change. Dr. King's philosophies emerged from a culmination of different sources, but the Bible was undoubtedly one of them. His theology was firmly rooted in the Old Testament morality teachings on absolute justice, which had been greatly emphasized in the churches of the Black community. He was also influenced by the seemingly contradictory ideals of liberal Protestantism, Niebuhrian neo-orthodoxy, and Gandhian maxims (Harvey 2005, 183). Taken together, these philosophies were the basis of the nonviolent resistance strategy to confront injustices taking place in the US. They also provided the sense of hope and faith needed to overcome the despair of the difficulties and obstacles to come.

### **The Prophetic Politics of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

One's upbringing has a significant effect on the rest of one's life, an idea that rings true for Dr. King. Born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929, he continued his family's tradition, becoming a Baptist preacher and social gospel proponent (*Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia*, "Introduction"). After enrolling at age 15, Dr. King attended Morehouse College where he was eventually ordained as a pastor. There, his interest in social issues grew as he majored in sociology, taking special interest in David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." He went on to obtain a degree in divinity from Crozer Theological Seminary, which he attended from 1948–51, and then continued his education, pursuing a doctoral degree in systematic theology from Boston University in 1955 (*Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia*, "Introduction"). Shortly after he completed his studies, defining moments began to occur. He became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where he met a group of leaders who would go on to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to protest the arrest of Rosa Parks. King was selected to lead the new group and became the spokesperson of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–56 (*Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia*, "Introduction"). He was able to draw on his background to fulfil both roles well, enabling him to gain national attention and prominence. The culmination of Christianity, education, and political interest aligned to create an atmosphere for King to uphold ideologies, allowing him to be an effective leader.

Initially, King strictly used Christian ideals in his ideologies, only emphasizing Old Testament morality. It was Bayard Rustin and Glenn E. Smiles who persuaded him to affirm the philosophy of nonviolence as an essential maxim and to lace his discourse with Gandhian and pacifist doctrines (Fairclough 1986, 430). This doctrine of nonviolence gave him the appearance of civility and respectability, which appealed to many whites and enhanced his image as a man of peace and temperance.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sort of prophetic politics: the idea that the US had not yet reached its destiny of freedom and justice for all, but one day would after political, economic, and societal transformations were completed. He was less concerned with individual redemption and salvation than with the overall message of Jesus Christ (Guterman 2018, 70). He aimed at the realization of temporal justice rather than individual salvation, warning of God's judgement of corrupt institutions, especially those of the church and the state (Guterman 2018, 70–71). He linked racism with other problems of life, saying: "From capitalism to colonialism, the perception of racism in America as a permanent factor in African American oppression infused the critical analysis of all aspects of American life" (as quoted in Anderson 2010, 105). He believed that class factors were so intertwined with race that it was difficult to separate the two, so there was a need to resist every system of repression.

King drew strong comparisons between the existing situation of Black people and the plight of groups in the Bible, using his scholarship and sophisticated knowledge acquired through his studies. He alluded to the biblical Exodus narrative when talking about the movement for civil rights, saying that the struggle was between justice and injustice just as it was in the Bible (Guterman 2018, 74). He was quite fond of Ghana's enactment of the Exodus narrative and adopted ideas such as the oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed, and that liberty only comes from persistent revolt, agitation, and rising up against the system of evil (Guterman 2018, 76–77). He believed that one day everyone would see the justice and freedom that had been manifested in Ghana, saying that "every valley shall be exalted, and every hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the round places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (as quoted in Guterman 2018,

77). These Biblical notions of justice played a major role in his approach to the issues facing the Black community.

### **The Formation of the SCLC and Civil Disobedience**

The strategy of civil disobedience stemmed from the idea that action needed to be taken in a peaceful and nonviolent way. Civil disobedience was a form of protest that the SCLC adopted as part of their nonviolent resistance methods. According to King, God would both excuse and support their defiance of government—their behavior being justified since what they were fighting for was morally upright. In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963), he states that “one has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” For King, morality was dependent on the higher moral law of God, and if the country’s laws contrasted this, the people had the right, given by God, to disobey in an effort to change them.

King was a supporter of healthy Black consciousness. In “The Three Dimensions” (1967), he states that there are far too many Blacks who are ashamed to be so, that “a Negro gotta rise up and say from the bottom of his soul, ‘I am somebody. I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage.’” He encourages them to embrace their painful history and exploitation and come to the realization that they are Black and beautiful. King also held that it was not about reaching or failing to reach the promised land, but one’s intentions during the journey. He said: “Salvation isn’t reaching the destination of absolute morality, but it is being in the process and on the right road” (as quoted in Gutterman 2018, 82). Striving for justice was what was most important, to not give up on the way to the land flowing with milk and honey, or in this case, freedom and equality. He took these ideals with him to help form an organization that would encapsulate his beliefs concerning race, politics, and religion.

The SCLC was created to represent all who had taken part in organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as no other organization, including the widely popular NAACP, had sufficient breadth of membership to represent them. While attending the Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change in 1956, a conference held by the Montgomery Improvement Association, King noticed that other southern activists shared his desire for more interaction. Using the Montgomery movement as a basis for a wider civil rights initiative, Stanley Levison and Bayard Rustin proposed the idea of a Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration, which would maintain the psychological momentum generated from Montgomery and translate the boycott strategy into a broad strategy for protest in the South (Garrow 1986, 139). Rustin claimed that in targeting specific areas of Jim Crow, the political and economic order would be challenged as well (Garrow 1986, 140).

Levison and Rustin were in agreement, declaring that they wanted King as the face of the new organization. First, King’s qualities would appeal to the wealthier professionals of the Black community, who would otherwise be indifferent on public issues. Also, being a minister, he would appeal to conservative clergy members, as well as Black churchgoers, who were essential in sustaining the boycott (Garrow 1986, 25–26). As a minister, he also had certain privileges compared to the rest of the Black population, being freely able to express his opinions and indulge in his own courses of action without fear of being fired or facing any consequences. As part of the Black elite, along with Black doctors, dentists, lawyers, and others, he had economic security, which allowed him to go against white opinions (Fairclough 1987, 14). Ministers also have the ability to arouse and mobilize their congregations, and King was an articulate speaker, having been schooled in the expressive use of language in both the church and in higher

education (Garrow 1986, 47). Thus, the structure of the organization was deliberately built around Dr. King, and it operated in an autocratic fashion that allowed him to make the majority of major decisions.

At their second meeting, the group organized a prayer pilgrimage for freedom. Rooted in deep spiritual faith, the march was an appeal to pass a civil rights bill that would give the justice department power to file lawsuits against discriminatory registration and voting practices in the South. The turnout was smaller than expected, but it shows their commitment to Christian ideals early on. This is where King gave the speech “Give Us the Ballot” on the steps of Lincoln Memorial on the third anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* [1954] decision, which had outlawed segregation in public schools. King concluded the speech by stating, “each of us must keep faith with the future. Let us realize that as we struggle alone, but God struggles with us. He is leading us out of a bewildering Egypt, through a bleak and desolate wilderness, toward a bright and glittering promised land” (as quoted in Gutterman 2018, 79). It was both a message of motivation and one that connected the political with the spiritual.

At their first annual convention, with over one hundred attendees, King proposed renaming the organization to what it is known as today, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He wanted to emphasize that the organization had obtained most of its members and participants from the Black church. It was also a prevailing opinion that the organization would be guided by Christian principles and that the name should reflect their religious orientation. This proposal was met with disagreement as some believed that the word Christian would deter non-religious supporters, but the SCLC held firm as many of its founders were Christian ministers (Garrow 1986, 160–61). Of the founders, most were college graduates and had obtained higher degrees or seminary training, so they had well-established churches and belonged to the Black social elite. Over the next decade, the SCLC created many campaigns and developed its ideologies, quickly moving alongside other major civil rights movement groups. Together, the SCLC, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Urban League (NUL), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) became known as the Big Five.

As the SCLC was essentially created for Dr. King, many of his ideologies became those of the entire organization and would eventually become what the civil rights movement was known for. The organization used top-down leadership, in that their ideologies came from the top leadership, rather than from the influence of its members (Anderson 2010, 112). The moral foundations of the organization’s arguments were drawn from the perception that racism was an inherent part of the many issues that plagued both the economic and political systems in the US—what is known today as critical race theory (Anderson 2010, 73). These critiques, combined with ideals from the social gospel, came together to form the SCLC’s ideologies for protests, demonstrations, and goals for moral transformations of the South that would “redeem the soul of America” (Fairclough 1987, 32).

The basic aim of the SCLC included attaining full citizenship rights and equality for Blacks and achieving the integration of Blacks into all aspects of American life. The SCLC believed that the American dilemma regarding race relations could best and most quickly be resolved through the actions of thousands of people committed to the philosophy of nonviolence, and that it was not enough to be dissatisfied with an evil system, but that a “true nonviolent protester presents his physical body as an instrument to defeat the system” (Anderson 2010, 98). Connections can be drawn here to how Jesus presented his physical body as a living sacrifice to overcome the sin of the world. The SCLC connected religious beliefs with politics, giving the main reason for the

need to uproot racial discrimination from society as, simply, that it was morally wrong. To bring about what was both morally right and politically palatable, the SCLC argued for the fundamental fairness of liberalism, which would also create the truly democratic state that the country had been struggling to achieve (Anderson 2010, 101).

The SCLC also critiqued the dominant economic system, supporting the idea that the larger problems facing Blacks and the US were due to capitalism, as the design of the system inherently created inequality among American citizens (Anderson 2010, 106). To gain economic independence, they needed to gain political power. Therefore, they firmly supported voter registration as these rights could be used to realize the just and democratic society that African Americans longed for.

The SCLC stressed the importance of fusing together religious faith, community action, and progressive politics to reach a more ideal America (Anderson 2010, 97). It was not merely about changing laws, but about evoking change in such a way that the laws, politics, and economic system would bend to the power of a morally unified community (Anderson 2010, 97). They had to find a way to reshape people's moral beliefs, which is why Christianity was and is still an integral part of the SCLC's foundational principles. The notion that some whites were willing to deny assistance to other whites to keep Blacks from obtaining equality strengthened the SCLC's stance that these were moral issues, and provided a solid foundation for a political strategy of mass action (Anderson 2010, 96). They used their ideologies to evoke change that aligned with their core values, essentially attacking every cause of Black subjugation in America. Organizing at the grassroots level allowed them to develop this multifaceted set of ideals.

### **The Organizing Efforts of the SCLC and Dr. King from 1960–68**

Started by students at North Carolina A&T University, the sit-ins of 1960 were where the SCLC really got its start. As the movement grew, the SCLC decided to take on the role of organizing training sessions for nonviolent protests. Meeting with nearly every historically Black college, both the SCLC and CORE provided student protestors with workshops and conferences on nonviolence, bringing together hundreds of students and giving them a space to coordinate their efforts (Hohenstein 2020). King spoke at these conferences on his philosophies, which proved to have an effect on Harold Middlebrook, who exclaimed to others while being held in prison: "Dr. King meant letting nonviolence control even your inner being...[He] talked constantly of Thoreau and Bondurant and of Gandhi and Christ" (as quoted in Fairclough 1987, 90). This shows that King's philosophies were penetrating the minds of others, but also that Christianity was active, influencing people's morals as well.

King was hesitant at first to get involved fully in the protests and CORE, since it was very small and just getting started with little money and no field staff. However, he eventually gave in, and together they were able to make an impact. They led a "prayer meeting" on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol, which aroused Black support even more effectively than the sit-ins, supporting the idea that Christianity was a significant and influential element of the demonstrations and overall movement (Fairclough 1987, 61). Together, the SCLC and CORE were effective in getting white business owners to desegregate in many of the upper-South states, but many businesses in the Deep South remained segregated. Although segregation remained in some places, the abolishment in others proved that the end of Jim Crow was inevitable (Fairclough 1987, 190). The sit-ins marked the first time that Black communities had joined together to engage in civil rights activism, but they failed to gain national attention and federal intervention. So, they sought another course of action.



Although the freedom rides were ultimately successful, they created tension that forced the SCLC to grow as an organization. At the start of the rides in 1961, King was weary of using nonviolent direct action, but as the movement began to gain national attention, he decided to support the efforts of CORE (Fairclough 1987, 77–78). After learning that a group of riders were facing violent mobs, he staged a rally where he called for the government to intervene and stop the violence, again reiterating the importance of nonviolence. At the rally, King (1961) stated, “we must be sure that we adhere absolutely to nonviolence” to achieve the “moral victory.” His reference to a moral victory highlighted the religious component of the results they were hoping for. He also talked about how the situation they were in was at a testing point, presumably from God, that would determine the outcome of the movement. King became a major spokesperson for the rides, and the SCLC became instrumental in keeping them in motion, but King faced much backlash for not actively participating in the demonstrations.

King wanted the SCLC to have an image of reasonableness and moderation, which the rides did not reflect. He believed that CORE members were brave, but saw their actions as reckless and provocative, and so maintained his distance (Fairclough 1987, 78). During this time until about 1963, the SCLC’s focus was on voter registration rather than direct action, and since the organization was still really a blueprint, King had to be cautious of his image. He had to ensure that he did not go to jail too often or simply try to avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This lack of enthusiasm to lead a sit-in or be jailed cast doubts on King’s leadership qualities and called his personal integrity into question for SNCC members, who made up most of the freedom riders (Fairclough 1987, 74).

SNCC was founded in 1960 by young people with the encouragement of Ella Baker and was much more radical than other groups. They took the bottom-up approach to leadership, the complete opposite of the SCLC, and questioned the moderation of older activists, desiring change at a fast, rather than gradual, rate (Cobb 2018). SNCC members were much more willing to take risks and sacrifice their bodies for the cause, which put them at odds with the SCLC and King’s approach to achieving racial advancement. Despite their differences, both groups took the rides as a learning experience, adopting the ideal that provoking white southerners through nonviolent demonstrations could attain national attention and federal action. In this case, federal action resulted in the Interstate Commerce Commission issuing a ban on racial segregation and discrimination during interstate travel and desegregating all facilities under its jurisdiction.

The Albany Movement of 1961 was the SCLC’s first attempt at initiating an event and where it really began to make progress in the South. Although the movement was unsuccessful, the group gained much needed knowledge that they would take to protests and demonstrations going forward. Their goals were to obtain fair employment practices, put an end to police brutality, and call for the desegregation of bus, train, and all other municipal facilities (Fairclough 1987, 87). They put together a negotiation committee and performed mass demonstrations, forms of nonviolence valued by King and his organization. King (1962) said in a mass meeting that they could not let the community sink into more “moral degeneracy.” He went on to support the tactic of civil disobedience, saying that there was nothing new about law breaking, that many had done it in the past, and that the city commissioners were the real law breakers. They sought to “evade the law” in hate and violence, but, he said, “we break the law openly,” aiming to create moral balance (King 1962). Their demands proved to be too ambitious and too vague to accomplish anything, but they were able to learn how to mobilize Black southerners. The SCLC was able to strengthen its northern support apparatus and legal representation and achieve better footing in

the South, assisting the group in creating a more effective protest strategy for the Birmingham Campaign (Fairclough 1987, 96).

The SCLC went into Birmingham in 1963 with the attitude that if this segregationist stronghold could be won over, the rest of the South would follow. Given what they had learned in Albany, SCLC members believed that victory was finally possible. They took a more unambiguous approach in terms of their demands, targeting lunch counters, boycotting stores, leading marches and jail-ins, and conducting the renowned Children's March (Fairclough 1987, 123–24). During this campaign, King wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963), which became a model document of the civil rights movement. In this letter, he persuasively defends the tactics of civil disobedience and nonviolence. He states that they were not reckless in their decision to engage in direct action, and that its overall purpose is to "create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." He justifies civil disobedience, citing its role in differentiating between a just law—a "man-made code that squares with the moral law"—and an unjust law—a "code that is out of harmony with the moral law." The latter are, in fact, not laws at all, and therefore "segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but is morally wrong and sinful" (King 1963). King's continual defense and justification of his protest tactics reflect his commitment to his faith and his country and were a driving factor for victory in Birmingham.

The Birmingham Campaign sent shockwaves through the South and its successes gave hope to Black Americans in other cities that were anti-desegregation. Much more successful than in its efforts in Albany, the SCLC got stores and lunch counters to desegregate their facilities within ninety days, as well as hire Black clerks and salesmen. The organization thus played a decisive role in persuading the Kennedy administration to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as there was a direct connection between the demonstrations and its implementation (Fairclough 1987, 132–39). King (1965) supported provoking white violence, as we see in his statement: "white America was profoundly aroused by Birmingham because it witnessed the whole community of Negroes facing terror and brutality with majestic scorn and heroic congress." This was the only way to gain their attention and support. The campaign became known as the "best organized and most highly disciplined action" and as a model for SNCC, CORE, and other organizations (Fairclough 1987, 151). It demonstrated the need to involve thousands in the fight against segregation, setting the stage for a full-scale revolt against it.

The 1963 March on Washington also helped in the passing of the civil rights bill. As envisaged by King a mere ten days before Kennedy announced his intentions to create the bill, leading representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths banded together in support of the demands of the Black community (Fairclough 1987, 153). This involvement of white churches helped to produce an enduring petition for the bill, proving churches to be the most effective advocates of the much-needed legal change. The passing of the bill showed that churches were united, responsible, and determined.

In 1964, the SCLC took on the challenge of the Klan stronghold in St. Augustine, Florida. Using many of the same tactics of previous campaigns, they added wade-ins and organized a night march intended to draw out the Klan. They wanted to show the true colors of the police and expose the inadequacy of local law enforcement (Fairclough 1987, 184–85). The demonstrations proved to be fairly effective, resulting in the state taking note of the Klan problem and persuading businessmen of the inevitability of desegregation, making them comply with the recently implemented civil rights bill (Fairclough 1987, 190). The influence of King and the SCLC was great, with one demonstrator saying, "the good Lord doesn't make a Martin Luther

King every day...if he can come down here and go to jail, the least you can do is go with him” (Fairclough 1987, 186). This shows that Christianity was a relational factor that persuaded people to support and act in the SCLC’s efforts, which would happen many times over during the civil rights movement.

The 54-mile, five-day march in Selma, Alabama in 1965 across the Edmund Pettus Bridge directly resulted in Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, with Johnson directly referring to the events in Selma as affecting his decision to do so (*Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia*, “Selma to Montgomery March”). On the final day of the rally, King gave his speech “Our God is Marching On,” in which he addressed the importance of the right to vote, defying the status quo, and the need to be committed to nonviolence. He stated that they should continue to “march on ballot boxes” until they achieved every goal they had, and compared this to how, in the Bible, the men of Joshua marched around Jericho until the walls came tumbling down. He brought in his prophetic politics to encourage the masses to continue using nonviolence to reconstruct a new normal that “recognizes the dignity and worth of all of God’s children” and where judgement and righteousness would prevail. He ended with the idea that God’s truth would ultimately prevail, as the “arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

King’s endeavors with the SCLC from 1965 until his death in 1968 were concerned with urban poverty in Chicago through the Chicago Freedom Movement, which branched out to other low-income Black neighborhoods. King’s philosophies regarding economics can be seen in these efforts, in which they used nonviolence to address the economic exploitation and poverty of African Americans in the north. King believed that these tactics were needed to “eradicate a vicious system which seeks to further colonize thousands of Negroes within a slum environment” (as quoted in *Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia*, “Chicago Campaign”). The SCLC led demonstrations against de facto segregation in education, housing, and employment, and also launched Operation Breadbasket, which aimed to abolish racist hiring practices by having companies move to African American neighborhoods (“Chicago Campaign”). King was fully committed to the cause, even moving his family to a Chicago slum, as he believed that Blacks, along with other minorities, would never achieve full citizenship until they had economic security. Before his death, King planned a march on Washington to demand jobs, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, and education for poor adults and children designed to improve their self-image and self-esteem (*Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia*, “Poor People’s Campaign”). Ralph Abernathy became the new president of the SCLC and continued the campaign but attained little success in programs for the poor (“Poor People’s Campaign”).

## Conclusion

The civil rights movement was both a political and religious crusade. Having legislative aims and being sustained by Protestant imagery and fervor, it is the quintessential example of the intersection of politics, race, and religion in America. Although a secular movement, it pulled its substance from religious and spiritual theology, language, and inspiration. Rituals of mass meetings, revivalist preaching, and sacred singing combined to create an atmosphere that was primed to bring about change. Along with this, the organizational presence of the Black church substantially impacted the favorable resolutions of the many boycotts, protests, and demonstrations of the SCLC and beyond, which led to significant societal changes.

Christianity was the driving force behind the civil rights movement, acting as a unifying factor to bring together individuals to evoke political change. The ideologies for protests that

stemmed from biblical principles proved to be effective. The Black churches' involvement with racial politics played an instrumental role in the passing of long-desired legislation, and the SCLC had a notable impact on the civil rights movement and its triumphs. The shared philosophies of Dr. King and the SCLC contributed much to the motivations behind and outcomes of the movement. The rise to prominence of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC reflected the long history of Black leaders using religious institutions as an instrument for organizing, galvanizing, and inspiring their communities. Leaving a permanent mark on the South as a force to be reckoned with, the SCLC was arguably one of the most effective pressure groups that the United States has ever known.

Despite the efforts and success of Dr. King and the SCLC, their philosophies and strategies were overshadowed by King's death. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s diminished, as there was no other leader of Dr. King's stature to take over, and the nonviolent strategies and Christian moralism that had defined the movement were eclipsed by the Black Power movement. This movement stressed the importance of freedom by any means necessary, contrasting the teachings and beliefs of the preceding movement. Willing to rely on violence, the group deemed the previous strategies unlikely to bring about more radical and imminent change. Nevertheless, King's legacy lives on as he was one of the most well-known Black leaders in the world. The SCLC was essential in making great progress toward civil rights and showcasing the power of Christianity in evoking political change, a legacy that the Black Power movement could never overshadow.

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## The Cost of Race Reductionism: Review of *Toward Freedom* by Touré F. Reed

Carly Wetzel

Touré Reed published *Toward Freedom* on February 25, 2020, just before the tumultuous onslaught of events that revealed the deepest extents of American inequality. In his work, Reed argues that true justice and equality for African Americans is impeded by the practice of race reductionism and the protection of neoliberal enterprise. He asserts that the failure to rectify the injustices at the core of America's foundation results from ignoring the inextricable link between race and class and the inability to condemn capitalism's role as the root cause of racial injustice.

*Toward Freedom* puts forth its case against race reductionism at a critical point of relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted Black people, has been accompanied by a series of police killings of Black people, including the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. In the midst of the pandemic, the 2020 Democratic primary election ended with a coalescence of corporatist Democrats bolstering Joe Biden's nomination over Bernie Sanders's popular progressive campaign. In the year following the publication of his book, the neoliberal discourse Reed condemns for divorcing race from class was amplified once again, even as the extremity of racial and economic inequalities were revealed. Reed's critical analysis of America's race reductionist approach to facing systemic inequality ultimately foreshadows the consequences of its inadequacies—hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths due to the prioritization of capital over human life during the pandemic.

Reed begins *Toward Freedom* with a recapitulation of the 2016 Democratic primary, which was “condensed around two distinct visions of social justice” (17), Hillary Clinton's embrace of neoliberal upward redistribution and Bernie Sanders's public good framework. Reed uses this contrast to show how the public good economic policies of the 1930s bolstered the American middle class—albeit the white American middle class—and increased the financial welfare of many American families. Through comprehensive policies like the National Labor Relations Act and the Social Security Act, workers were afforded “a much-strengthened right to collective bargaining; insulation from financial hardship...; a forty-hour work week; and a floor below which workers' wages could not fall” (12). Reed effectively asserts the merit of public good-oriented economic policy, showing its strong correlation with the improvement of the American quality of life. Reed then dives directly into the Black progressive movements of the era, which emphasized labor activism as a vital means to achieving racial equality.

As Reed explains, Black activists during the New Deal era identified the advancement of the working class through unionization, public works, and redistributive programs as the key to uplifting Black Americans. Although the exclusion of Black people from the benefits of the New Deal policies precluded them from significant economic advancement, “the so-called Depression decade was fertile ground for several political, social and intellectual developments that would eventually blossom into the insurgent black political activism of the 1950s and 1960s” (48). Labor-oriented goals were originally a cornerstone of civil rights agendas that sought material improvement in the lives of Black people, Reed writes. However, the unity of Black civil rights and labor movements splintered as the rightward drift of American politics coincided with the rise of ethnic pluralism, resulting in the dissolution of discourse that addressed racial and

economic inequality as interconnected forces. The focus of civil rights efforts shifted toward antidiscrimination policy, voting rights, and integration as racism was identified “as a psychological defect rather than a symptom of class exploitation” (89).

After recounting the leftist politics and labor focuses of Black activists in the New Deal era, Reed describes how, after World War II, the liberal discourse surrounding racial inequality treated it as a moral dilemma rather than a socioeconomic class conflict. This attitude intensified during the Cold War as opposition to leftist ideology became increasingly hostile and “policymakers bound their opposition to racism to a human rights discourse that rejected economic security—the right to a job, a living wage, health care and so on—as a right...and, instead, identified values consistent with liberal capitalism—the right to personal expression, private property, religious freedom—as universal rights” (43). The embracement of race reductionism and neoliberalism designated inequality as the result of cultural and character deficiencies rather than structural socioeconomic flaws. These attitudes were reflected in legislation, including The Housing Act of 1949, which demobilized the labor movement by converting the working class into a petite bourgeoisie (68), and President Johnson’s War on Poverty, which failed to reduce poverty because of its lack of redistributive programs (102).

Reed then discusses how the institutional policies of the War on Poverty, meant to “redress the character deficiencies of the poor” (64), were encouraged by the ethnic pluralism put forth in the Moynihan report, which “argued that social pathologies afflicting a stratum of poor blacks would likely undercut antipoverty initiatives that failed to account for the cultural damage inflicted upon blacks by slavery and Jim Crow” (58). This philosophy ushered the War on Poverty’s devolution into an assault on poor people through the cruelty of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration as well as cuts to public housing and social welfare programs.

Reed’s analysis of the devolution of civil rights activism from an intersectional class movement to a redress of lower-class character deficiencies highlights how the nation’s perception of racism as a psychological and moral ill is an incomplete account of the causes of inequality. This misdiagnosis ultimately results in inadequate policies that fail to ameliorate disparities and instead protect oppressive institutions. Reed stresses this testament in his final chapter, where he brings his argument to contemporary relevance by analyzing the shortcomings of author Ta-Nehisi Coates and President Barack Obama, the “Twins of neoliberal benign neglect” (168). Both Obama and Coates are agents of the race reductionist camp, he argues, although their views are diametrically opposed. Reed explains that “whereas President Obama’s soaring post-racialism licensed the continuation of liberal indifference to the plight of economically marginal people via underclass metaphors, Coates’s post-post racial commitment to racial ontology signs off on white liberal hand-wringing and public displays of guilt as alternatives to practicable solutions to disparities” (103). He asserts that both Obama and Coates fail to acknowledge how the exploitation of the laboring class has disproportionately burdened Black people. Instead, they focus on prejudice and cultural deficiencies as the drivers of inequity and the Black plight. This is clear in Coates’s own writing, which “attribute[s] persistent racial disparities to white Americans’ seemingly metaphysical commitment to racism” (Aspholm 2021, 1), as he defends that “white supremacy was a force in and of itself, a vector often intersecting with class, but also operating independent of it” (Coates 2021, 1).

The result of both Obama and Coates’s race reductionism is that African Americans are presented with “symbolic or rhetorical wins as alternatives to substantive improvements in their material lives” (109). This encompasses Reed’s main point: focusing on antidiscrimination, diversity, and entrepreneurial uplift without state intervention in economic exploitation through

redistributive policies, universal welfare programs, and public works has minimal material benefit for African Americans who are continuously disadvantaged by the workings of capitalism. Until this is realized and addressed there will be no progress toward equality and justice.

Reed's case against race reductionism comes during a period of heightened focus on racism in America. Outrage over police brutality has reignited concern with the country's unforgivable history of racial oppression. However, as represented by Biden's win over Sanders in the 2020 primary, emphasis has been placed on an approach to anti-racism that ignores the faults of capitalism. Pundits emphasize increasing diversity, cultural awareness, and representation to eradicate white supremacy. Meanwhile, substantive initiatives such as increasing the minimum wage, abolishing the prison industrial complex, and reallocating funds to community outreach and development are deemed as exceedingly radical. Without employing such policies, anti-discriminatory movements dismiss the economic underpinnings of racial inequality that the leaders in the African American freedom struggle of the 1930s and 1940s recognized fully. In their fight, they knew that their oppression was rooted in the capitalist necessity of an exploited class. They understood that their own liberation and elevation could come only in the absence of all capitalist exploitation, and so their movements were broad-based class coalitions across racial divides that aimed for the material improvement of their living and laboring conditions.

The approach Reed advocates for in *Toward Freedom* must be taken if any progress toward a more just and equal society is to be made. In the wake of a devastating global crisis that has left the most vulnerable to face the worst suffering, a reckoning with the political economy that has allowed a preventable catastrophe to wreak such havoc must come. *Toward Freedom* needs to be widely read so that the faults of race reductionism and capitalism do not claim the lives of even more Americans.

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