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“All The Women Are Meeting:”  
The National Council of Negro Women, Emerging Africa,  
and Transnational Solidarity, 1935-1966

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in History

by

Yatta Winnie Kiazolu

2020

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“All The Women Are Meeting:”

The National Council of Negro Women, Emerging Africa,  
and Transnational Solidarity, 1935-1966

by

Yatta Kiazolu

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Brenda Stevenson, Chair

In the postwar period, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), the largest African American women’s organization in the United States, positioned themselves as representatives of Black women’s interests on the world stage. Previous studies of founder Mary McLeod Bethune’s internationalism has highlighted her prominent role in this arena primarily through the United Nations, as well as the ways NCNW carried this legacy through their efforts to build relationships with women across the diaspora. But beyond highlighting their activism and the connections they made, the substance and meaning of these relationships as the Cold War and African independence introduced new political terrain has been underexplored.

Africa’s prominence on the world stage by the late 1950s reinvigorated the need for Black diaspora activists to strengthen their relationships on the continent. Toward this end, NCNW leaders such Dorothy Ferebee, Vivian Mason, Dorothy Height forged connections with their counterparts across the Atlantic. African women such as Ghana’s Mabel Dove and Evelyn

Amarteifio, Tanzania's Lucy Lameck, among numerous others played critical roles within their respective independence movements. They called on diasporic and continental experiences through conferences, participating in exchange programs, and coordinating training to prepare women for new roles in emerging nations. This project fit neatly within Council women's own domestic struggle for full citizenship and inclusion through, in part, fighting to expand their sphere of leadership and influence.

This study argues that together, NCNW and African women nationalists collaborated to collectively to develop their own autonomous agenda toward strengthening women's inclusion in the nation building process. In this process, they constructed alternatives to deeply masculinized notions and methods of nation building. In their efforts to work across borders, the terms of their solidarity would be shaped and confined by national Cold War priorities, with various implications. This study brings together Civil Rights, African decolonization, and women and gender histories to understand the possibilities and limitations of making women's issues part of the larger African liberation struggle in the early Cold War period.

The dissertation of Yatta Winnie Kiazolu is approved.

Aisha Finch

Sarah Haley

Robin D.G. Kelley

Brenda Stevenson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Lenora Reeves Gant.

Your love for your family and care for women and children's needs will always be remembered.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CAA	Council of African Affairs
CofC	Committee of Correspondence
CWAAD	Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent
CPP	Convention People's Party
HUAC	House of Un-American Activities
NCNW	National Council of Negro Women
NFGCW	National Federation of Gold Coast Women
UN	United Nations
UNCIO	United Nations Conference on International Organization
USIA	United States Information Agency
WAC	Women's Africa Committee

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I cannot begin these acknowledgements without first recognizing that this dissertation was completed in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost 100,000 people have lost their lives in this public health crisis with a disproportionate impact on communities of color. My ability to write, research, and think in the safety of my home, was in part, made possible by the countless essential workers in food service, healthcare, transportation, delivery, and other industries whose labor upon which society rests. This acknowledgement is not made to further the hero narrative which seeks to normalize the disproportionate harm they face, but instead a gesture toward recognition of their humanity and the value of their life apart from their labor.

The kind of precariousness this pandemic has caused has been a familiar state of existence as a Black immigrant woman struggling against anti-Black, neo-imperial immigration policies. It simply would not have been possible to finish my program without a community of organizers, attorneys, and advocates who stood by my side. Patrice Lawrence, Amaha Kassa, Nekessa Opoti, Sadatu Mamah- Trawill, Nana Gyamfi, Guerline Jozef, and the rest of my folks from UndocuBlack Network, African Communities Together, Black Alliance for Just Immigration, Haitian Bridge Alliance, Black Immigrant Collective, and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law- Thank you for empowering impacted communities to speak for themselves! I have learned so much from you all. To my UCLA community- Habiba Simjee, Abel Valenzuela, Kelly Lytle-Hernandez, Valeria Garcia, Christine Wilson, UCLA's Department of History staff, and my UndocuGrad family, because of all you I learned I was not alone. A very special thank you to my therapists Adriana Janicic and Ellie Hernandez for helping me weather this storm.

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I would not have known a graduate career was even an option if not for Dr. Bill Worger and Dr. Nancy Clark. Thank you for helping to open this door and being awesome support along the way. My undergraduate professors from Delaware State University, Dr. Akwasi Osei, Dr. Marshall Stevenson, Dr. Jahi Issa, and Dr. Ahati Toure, you all have played a foundational role in my journey.

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call dear friends and now PhDs! Dr. Amirah Saafir and Dr. Amber Withers, few understand what this experience is like and it is no exaggeration to say that I could not have done this without you. Congratulations to us! Antwann Michael, Madina Thiam, Thabisile Griffin, Nicole Gilhuis, and the members of my many writing groups, you all are truly some of the best and brilliant minds up next. To my personal person, Brett Roberts, thank you for believing in me and giving me space to accomplish this dream that felt bigger than me.

I look forward to achieving new heights with your continued support.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Yatta Winnie Kiazolu is a graduate of Delaware State University in Dover, Delaware, where she received her B.A. in History in 2012. Upon graduation, she traveled to South Africa as a participant in the inaugural cohort of the International Engaged Social Science Summer Mentorship Program through the University of California- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (UC-HBCU) Initiative Program. In Fall 2013, she began graduate studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) pursuing a doctorate in History. While at UCLA she received support from UC-HBCU Initiative Fellowship, Eugene Cota-Robles Fellowship, Institute of American Cultures Pre-Doctoral Fellowship through the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, and the UCLA Graduate Council. As a student, she worked as the Campus Climate and Diversity Program Coordinator in the Graduate Student Resource Center and participated in the Undocumented Student Program. She has taught 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. history at California State University, Long Beach and Delaware State University.

## INTRODUCTION

“All the women are meeting,’ so, told this, I set out to see what they were doing” wrote Dorothy Height, as she arrived in Guinea on the day of the country’s most historic occasion since declaring independence from France, just two years prior, in 1958.<sup>1</sup> President Sekou Toure announced a radical change in the West African country’s economic system to establish its own currency and national bank, in an effort to fully rid the new nation of French colonial systems. The day also marked the 50th anniversary of International Women’s Day, and the capital city of Conakry overflowed with women and girls of all ages in celebration. On her first day in the city, she attended an event hosted by the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which brought together 43 women’s groups and almost 12,000 attendees to commemorate the occasion. The energy around women’s interests was not unique to Guinea, but part of the urgent organizing of African women across the continent. After all, 1960 had been declared the “Year of Africa” with 17 new nations on the world stage, and women increasingly came together to discuss their new roles in emerging nations.

President of the African American women’s club, National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Height was among a number of Council women who headed to the continent for the first time in this period. Among them included civil rights attorneys Pauli Murray and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, educator and president of the public service sorority Delta Sigma Theta Jeanne Noble, former NCNW president Dorothy Ferebee, attorney and foreign service professional Elsie Austin, and professor turned journalist Marguerite Cartwright. In Africa, they participated in women’s meetings, led trainings, and learned more about African women’s

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<sup>1</sup> Letter No. 2 from Miss Dorothy Height, March 10, 1960, Box 17, Folder 6, Committee of Correspondence Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

experiences. In the United States, they hosted African women leaders, created support networks for African students, encouraged members to travel to the continent, and educated the larger community about international developments. Council women, such as Marguerite Cartwright, were confidants to African national leaders. Through their efforts to support and collaborate with African women, all were active participants in Africa's struggle for independence. Through founder Mary McLeod Bethune, the Council made substantive efforts, especially in the immediate postwar era, to cultivate relationships with women abroad, especially in Africa. At the dawn of African decolonization, these relationships took on new significance and became even more pressing with the hope that women's political power in the struggle for independence would translate to a say in the nation building process, and thus Black women's social positions as part of a broader political shift.

Carrying the spirit of interdependence from the postwar period This study argues that together, NCNW and African women nationalists collaborated to collectively develop their own autonomous agenda toward strengthening women's inclusion in the nation building process. Challenging masculinist notions of nation-building which relegated them to the margins, this cadre of Black women activists worked to prepare women for new roles in emerging societies and on the world stage through educational programs, leadership training, and joint conferences. As aware and informed global citizens, Black women across the African continent and in the United States, would be better prepared to address their own collective needs in public life.

### *Argument*

The research questions guiding this project are: *What politics and ideologies shaped NCNW's solidarity efforts? What did African independence mean to these groups of women and how do they take advantage of new political openings? How do their hopes for this moment*



*compare and contrast with one another and on what terms are these hopes negotiated? What challenges and limitations shaped the possibilities of this moment?*

The NCNW and its leadership are a primary focus in this study because of its role as one of the largest Black women's clubs in the 20th century United States. The "organization of organizations" touted as many as 800,000 members in this period, by incorporating 22 Black women's clubs into the national body, including but not limited to professional, social, fraternal organizations. Through the activism of founder Mary McLeod Bethune, that is, her professional career as an educator and college president, leadership among Black clubwomen at the state and national levels, as well as her role in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet," NCNW became a high-profile, nationally recognized organization. During the Civil Rights movement, the Council joined the ranks of the Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), among other influential mainstream Civil Rights groups. Council women fought for an end to segregationist policies and increased roles for Black women at the federal level. They also worked to address the material needs of Black women and children concerning housing, education, food security, health, among other issues.

NCNW's Africa politics altered with changes in leadership, strategy, and political context. Four presidents led the Council throughout the 20th century. The women that assumed leadership after Bethune had been hand chosen to participate in the Council and mentored by her, serving actively in the organization for many years. Dorothy Ferebee (1949-1953), Vivian Mason (1953-1957), and Dorothy Height (1957-1998) trained professionally in the service of public good as social workers and health professionals. All three women firmly embraced Bethune's vision of community organizing centering Black women at the national and international levels. Still, each brought their own character of leadership to implement these

goals. Ferebee led NCNW after Bethune's retirement in 1949. The medical director at Howard University's Health Services in Washington D.C, much of the organization's major programs focused on issues such as women's health. Ferebee became active in Africa advocacy and foreign policy in the early 1960s first through the Women's Africa Committee of the African-American Institute. It is within this capacity that her efforts are explored in this study. Former first vice-president under Ferebee, Mason, a social worker, became the third national president. Mason led the Council during an uptick in the Civil Rights movement and the administration responded by strengthening the national office's efficacy. The national body elected Height, also a social worker, as the fourth national president. At the height of the Civil Rights movement's direct action campaigns, especially in the south, animated the Council to take up assertive challenges to racial inequality.<sup>2</sup>

NCNW was very much a product of Bethune's international activism. Her legacy as part of early 20th century organizations such as Margaret Murray Washington's International Council of Women of the Darker Races (ICWDR), demonstrates a protracted interest and participation in learning about global communities. She was part of an enduring legacy of internationally focused political organizing that traversed the 20<sup>th</sup> century where African American clubwomen utilized travel as a means to bring attention to domestic racial issues and forge alliances with women abroad. Most significantly, Bethune's leadership during World War II and the immediate postwar period, not only ensuring that Black women were included in relevant international committees but reaching out to women abroad, emphasizes the Council's role in creating a bridge among Black diaspora women. She leveraged her network to ensure that Council women

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood: The National Council of Negro Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018) 20-23, 36.

served as representatives of Black women's interest across issues at meetings, conferences, decision-making rooms, from the White House to the United Nations. In many cases, Council women were among the few, and oftentimes, only representatives of Black women's specific concerns.

Continental Africa serves as an important site of NCNW's postwar international activism. By the end of World War II, escalating anticolonial movements furthered by the fall of European empire held significant implications for the African diaspora. Black American activists connected their struggle for civil rights in the United States with colonized people in Africa and Asia. As the ancestral homeland, Africa has long held a complicated place in the political imaginations of African Americans as a site of rescue, pride, inspiration, ambivalence among other sentiments. Thus, the political opening brought on by the increased possibility of independent Black nations captured the attention of Black activists in the United States. As an organization with an international focus, the Council reached out to women in the Caribbean, Latin America, Canada, and Asia. However, their community building and solidarity efforts NCNW forged with African women deserve particular attention because of the political stakes of the moment.

The possibility of independent Black nation states shifted the way African Americans understood themselves in relation to the continent. Historians James Meriwether, Penny Von Eschen, and Kevin Gaines have demonstrated that, for African Americans, it inspired positive association with contemporary Africa and a return to diaspora politics because of the backing of state power.<sup>3</sup> The successful campaigns across the continent meant that Africa would lead the

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<sup>3</sup> James Hunter Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kevin

charge in liberating the diaspora. Ghana's independence in 1957 marked a flashpoint in the struggle for African independence. Preceded only by Liberia and Ethiopia, Ghana's independence was significant to Black diaspora activists because of Nkrumah's Pan-African vision for his homeland and the African continent as a whole. The "Black Star" nation became a symbol to the burgeoning number of Black states throughout the diaspora as a result of its status as the first sub-Saharan African country to gain control of its political affairs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was the real and imagined home of Black radicals, thinkers, activists the world over. Though different ideas about the global Pan-African community have been in debate since Black Nationalist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and have contended with, for example, the political needs of the Black diaspora, multiplicity of experiences, and methods of unification, African independence on the world stage marked a rupture in the colonial order. For the Black diaspora, it presented an opportunity to actualize a new political terrain devised to the advantage of people of African descent.

One measure of these possibilities is evidenced by the powerful role of women in Africa's independence struggle. In Ghana, Nkrumah's support for women who overwhelmingly brought his party to power, opened the door for an emergent feminist politics advanced by Ghanaian women such as journalist Mabel Dove and social worker Evelyn Amarteifio. In fact, with the goal of collective organizing around their own interests, many national women's groups and leaders emerged across the continent in the late colonial, early independence era, including but not limited to, the All African Women's League and National Federation of Gold Coast Women in Ghana, the National Federation of Liberian Women, Sierra Leone Federation of

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Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Women's Organizations, among numerous others. They organized across class and ethnic boundaries and called upon continental and diasporic experiences to support their foray into public life. So as Nkrumah and the company of male Pan-African leaders sought to position their new countries to transform the global Black community and its place in the world, Black women on the African continent and abroad worked to ensure that they too would have a say in what this transformation would look like.

As such, this dissertation examines the political alliances and other transnational relationships forged by Black women activists in this moment. Historian Brenda Gayle Plummer writes in reference to U.S. women groups that “the impressive credentials of these Black women’s organizations did not entitle them, however, to an equal seat at the table where the shape of the coming freedom struggle was debated and where prestigious African-American men contemplated their positions vis-à-vis the newly emerging states of Africa and the Caribbean.”<sup>4</sup> Despite African American women’s critical labor on all fronts for the liberation of their communities, African American women’s particular social, political, and economic needs were not integral to the broader Civil Rights platforms. During the era of decolonization, African and African American women assessed their positions within the larger community and their relations to one another in order to thwart larger global systems of racial and gender oppression in which they were all entangled. Within the rising tide of African decolonization, their activism in the form of joint conferences, educational programs, training, represented contested grounds within which they grappled with the uncertainties and political realities of civil rights and national liberation movements. African independence meant that their hopes while fervent, were

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<sup>4</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

also provisional and had to be arranged. While this moment represented great political possibilities, there were still limitations and challenges to their work. For Council women who were committed to U.S. liberal democracy, protecting U.S. interests in the context of the Cold War took priority as they struggle for full citizenship. African women nationalists reached the limits of patriarchal concession to their political power when increasing authoritarianism impeded their programmatic autonomy. Still, Black women's inclusion in the nation building process, and public life thereafter, would be a political imperative worth advancing.

The relationships Council women forged with African women in this moment raises important questions about the politics of solidarity as they worked within the confines of the nation-state. Historian Julie Gallagher has examined how many NCNW leaders such as Bethune, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Dorothy Height, Pauli Murray, Eunice Hunton Carter, past roles within New Deal administrations helped them see the possibilities of state expansion by way of their own new leadership positions and the ways they utilized these roles to impact their communities.<sup>5</sup> Within their clubs, they attended to women's needs, but becoming decision makers within the State would allow them to make a broad impact. As college educated, middle class Black women the terrains of their leadership and social mobility were hindered by racial and gender discrimination. So in the coming years, they continued to wage the struggle for full citizenship and inclusion in the U.S. by both advocating for an expansion of existing structures and utilizing various arms of the State to tackle important issues. Their commitment to this goal shaped the terms of their Africa solidarity and the mechanisms they utilized.

The Cold War context brought their agenda of increasing women's role in public life and U.S. foreign policy interests together. During World War II and in the immediate postwar years

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<sup>5</sup> Julie Gallagher, *Black Women & Politics in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012) 2-3.

Council women were active on the international front championing for anticolonialism and representing Black women interests in the United Nations. However, as the Cold War intensified these experiences made them the target of Cold War conservatives- the consequences of which could have severely undermined their positions as civic leaders, their struggle for full citizenship if perceived as disloyal to the U.S., and the ability to fight for Black women's global interests. As the U.S. endeavored to sway emerging nations towards U.S. democracy and capitalism, in part, by projecting a positive and progressive image that countered its race problem, NCNW established exchange programs for African women in coordination with the State Department and worked within the United States Information Agency (USIA) affiliated organizations in order to actualize their own goals of strengthening relationships with the continent.

This collaboration with the federal government had important benefits, but also came with consequences. First, by working within formal channels, they legitimized their campaigns allowing them to continue their work on the international front without backlash. Second, it offered necessary infrastructure and finances that would have been simply impossible for their organization to shoulder. Lastly, and most importantly, it strengthened their case for inclusion and full citizenship since helping prepare and train African women for new roles in public life could serve as a powerful standard that would challenge slow progress on race and gender in the U.S. and continue expanding their sphere of leadership. As Africa's prominence on the global stage elevated in the late 1950s, their efforts to forge relationships with African women also helped increase their cultural competency and racial pride which they shared with broader community through programming. However, working within State interests presented its own problems such as their limited influence of exchange programs as in the case of Ghanaian legislature Mabel Dove's tour. Council women voluntarily collaborated with the State because it

was consistent with the ways they made progress in the fight for full citizenship domestically. They believed in its ability to effect change and their ability to influence its course. In their struggle to ensure that the universality of U.S. democratic values applied to African Americans, the pressures of citizenship compromised the terms of their solidarity with African women as they isolated U.S. race problems in favor of focusing on gender issues. This is one example of the complicated nature of sustaining their dual political imperatives.

Africa's transition from the colonial context to the nation-state significantly shaped African women's activism. African clubwomen called on diasporic and continental experiences to support their incorporation into these new societies. They collaborated with their counterparts, like NCNW leaders, who had the same commitments and had already made some progress in the arena. Like their counterparts, they had experience working at the grassroots level to attend to women's interests, but also saw their access to the State as means to effect the lives of women widely and expand their roles in public life. But, since African nations emerged within the Cold War context, these new governments developed their own priorities to contend with the U.S. and Soviet Union rivalry. These Cold War priorities had various implications on their work including usurping women's movements in effort to consolidate state power. Even more, these emerging nations soon became the literal battle sites by which U.S. and Soviet Union waged their Cold War.

This dissertation is a history of how NCNW leadership, in collaboration with African women nationalists struggled for Black women's self-emancipation in the age of decolonization, civil and human rights, revealing their hopes and ambitions in a moment characterized by uncompromising agitation and a deep-seated belief in the promise of tomorrow. Through a reframing of Black women's internationalism which centers Africa, this project will explore



Council women's engagement with African independence from NCNW's founding to the end of the Nkrumah administration (1935-1966). Although their visions for Black freedom sometimes diverged, their debate sharply contrasted with the deeply masculinized ideals of Black freedom and nation building. Thus, this dissertation examines their activism, their debates, challenges, along with the wide network in which they operated in order to understand how they made meaning of this moment.

### *Literature Review*

This project is firmly situated within the histories of Black women's internationalism. As a formulation of Black freedom which traverses national boundaries and contends with global communities, Black internationalism has highlighted the global dimensions of Black people's experiences. These have included, for example, the contest in the Caribbean over the logics of empire to Black activists who looked to Communist China for reprieve and solidarity. These experiences extend beyond national boundaries.<sup>6</sup> As such, scholarship on Black internationalism has not been exclusive to Africa and the Americas, but has also explored the efforts and travels of Black activists around the world. Though the overall subject of Black internationalism is massive in terms of time and place, what recurs over this protracted undertaking are the political alliances and other transnational relationships that have been instrumental in shaping movements for Black freedom.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example: Frank Guidry, *Forging Diaspora: Afro Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Millery Polyne, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan-Africanism, 1870-1964* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010); Robin D.G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution." *Souls* 1,4 (1999), 6-41; Robeson Taj Frazier's *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

Black women have long defined and expanded ideas of Black freedom in conversation with global communities. The histories which have recovered much of this work has primarily focused on women of the Black left. This labor has been necessary because of the erasure of radical organizing, the dominance of male leadership and the ways construction of such leadership limited women to supportive roles-the labor of which was viewed as tangential to real political work. Important biographical studies by Carol Boyce Davies, Ula Y. Taylor, Gerald Horne, Gregg Andrews, and Barbara Ransby have recovered women of the Black left who's roles as central figures in the 20th century Black freedom movement have been obscured.<sup>7</sup> Collective biographies of women of the Black left by Dayo Gore, Erik McDuffie, Keisha Blain, for example, highlight the networks on which they built and relied as well as the historical continuities of their work.<sup>8</sup> These histories demonstrate the complex and broader conceptions of Black freedom across race, gender, and class.

Though more contemporary scholarship about Black women's internationalism has been heavily focused on women of the left, studies about Black clubwomen of the late 19th century and early 20th century have also connected this group to the international front. This includes, for example, studies by Michelle Rief and Lisa Materson who demonstrate the importance of the

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life & Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000); Gregg Andrews, *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2011); Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

international arena for Black women's activism to exercise leadership, obtain allies for their cause, and better relate their experiences to women abroad.<sup>9</sup> Even more, these studies make clear connections between Bethune and the internationalism of veteran clubwomen.

Histories about Mary McLeod Bethune and NCNW as it relates to internationalism has been concentrated on their postwar activism. Bethune's role as part of the U.S. United Nations delegation and Africa related advocacy has been highlighted in larger research on African Americans involvement with anticolonialism and foreign policy by historians Penny Von Eschen and Brenda Gayle Plummer.<sup>10</sup> As an organization, NCNW's role in representing Black women's interest through the United Nations has received attention by Julie Gallagher and Grace V. Leslie, demonstrating the impact of their postwar activities on both U.S. women's leadership and their own programmatic agenda.<sup>11</sup>

These studies reveal the importance of the postwar period for their international agenda; however, their work related to the UN is only one example of the multiple ways they pushed for Black women's leadership and interests on the international level. The UN has been a primary platform by which NCNW's international involvement has been analyzed in the immediate post-

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<sup>9</sup> Michelle Rief, "Thinking Locally, Acting Globally: The International Agenda of African American Clubwomen, 1880-1940," *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (Summer 2004): 203-222; Lisa G. Materson, "African American Women's Global Journeys and the Construction of Cross-ethnic Racial Identity," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (2009) 35-42.

<sup>10</sup> Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Julie Gallagher, "The National Council of Negro Women, Human Rights, and the Cold War," in *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, eds. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jaqueline L. Castledine, (New York: Routledge, 2011); Grace V. Leslie, "'United, We Can Build a Better World: The Internationalism of Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Council of Negro Women,'" in *To Turn The Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism*, eds. Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

war period. Their participation in the UN, as a globally recognized institution, shores their authority, legitimacy, and advances Black women's leadership in the realm of international relations. However, Considering the UN's inability to address concerns important to them such as global peace, colonialism, race and gender discrimination, as it relates to questions of Black freedom, it is through their people to people engagement where their most dynamic international agenda prevailed.

As it relates specifically to their Africa politics, studies about individual Council leaders offer more insight into how they engaged the continent during the late colonial, early independence era. Dorothy Ferebee's biography by Diane Kiesel includes a chapter on her international engagement, with partial emphasis on her work in the State Department.<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Grant examines NCNW's South African Children's Feeding Scheme under Vivian Mason's administration within a broader history of African American and South African solidarity efforts.<sup>13</sup> Kevin Gaines discusses Pauli Murray's experience in Ghana within a history of African Americans expatriates in Ghana during the Nkrumah administration.<sup>14</sup> Anna Arnold Hedgeman's biography by Jennifer Scanlon also includes a chapter about her brief time in Ghana during the summer of 1960.<sup>15</sup> Together this research makes important contributions toward understanding the activities of Council women on the international scene. Though, as disparate studies, African decolonization appears (particularly in biographies and autobiographies) as a moment of

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<sup>12</sup> Diane Kiesel, *She Can Bring Us Home: Dr. Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, Civil Rights Pioneer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Potomac Books, 2015) 211-222.

<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 184-206.

<sup>14</sup> Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*, 110-135.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 130-133.

interesting personal development in their lives and not part of a coordinated political project that emphasized the network, sustained efforts, and collaborative work with African women during a significant historical period for Black people.

Rebecca Tuuri's *Strategic Sisterhood* is the first full length study of NCNW. Tuuri pays particular attention to Dorothy Height and the Council's direct action campaigns in the U.S. South during the 1960s. This book includes a chapter on the Council's international work which offers an impactful study of NCNW's International Division and its activities in the 1970s and 1980s. This chapter examines Height's participation in the 1975 International Women's Year conference in Mexico City, NCNW's project in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland as well as their effort to establish connections in Togo, Senegal, and Ivory Coast during this time. Tuuri's study makes important contributions in assessing NCNW's impact in the 20th century, especially as it relates to their role in Africa related advocacy post-1960s, and offers analysis on Dorothy Height's activism, which deserves continued historical inquiry.<sup>16</sup>

Dedicating a full length assessment of Bethune's internationalism, historian Ashley N. Robertson's dissertation reexamines Bethune as a 20th century Pan-Africanist.<sup>17</sup> Where most examinations of Bethune and the Council center their domestic contributions, Robertson's study lays a foundation which connects Bethune to a long history of advocacy for people of African descent, featuring her work in the Caribbean and in Africa. This study begins with African

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<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood: The National Council of Negro Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); While Dorothy Height appears in popular literature, there are a limited number of historical studies about her life and activism on the domestic front, and even fewer about her internationalism. Her autobiography includes a chapter on her work in India and her West Africa tour, see Dorothy I. Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003) 219-233.

<sup>17</sup> Ashley N. Robertson, "The Drums of Africa Still Beat in my Heart:" The Internationalism of Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Council of Negro Women (1895-1960), PhD Dissertation, Howard University, 2013.

American clubwomen's international activities in the late 19th and early 20th century and closes with an appraisal of Bethune's legacy expressed through the Council's international agenda. Focusing on Bethune as a central figure, this study highlights the global dimensions of her activism.

This dissertation, "All the Women Are Meeting," departs from the aforementioned studies on NCNW by extending beyond Bethune and examining Council women's collective participation in a specific political project- that is the politics and practice of solidarity in the era of African decolonization and the Cold War. Situating NCNW's Africa politics within this historical moment reveals an expansive program, outside of the UN, within which Council women in various capacities were actively engaged with African independence and the place of African women in emerging societies. As such, this dissertation is a focused study of the ways Council leaders advanced women's issues in the context of African independence.

Historian Kevin Gaines reminds us that "the transnational approach to the study of Black and African liberation struggles must contend with the conjuncture of the cold war, African and Caribbean decolonization movements, and the U.S. civil rights movement."<sup>18</sup>As such, this project also intersects with histories of African women and nationalism. In what has otherwise been an overly masculinized narrative centering Pan-Africanist male leaders, studies uncovering the contributions, strategies, and ideas of African women within nationalist movements offer an alternative perspective from which to consider this moment. Historians Susan Geiger on Tanzania, Nina Emma Mba on Nigeria, Tanya Lyons on Southern Rhodesia, and Elizabeth Schmidt on Guinea, for example, assess women's political activities, the various ways they

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin Gaines, "Locating the Transnational in Postwar African American History" *Small Axe*, Number 28 (13, no. 1), March 2009: 7.

challenged colonial administrations as well as how they shared in liberation movements to forward agendas most beneficial to their lives.<sup>19</sup> Even more, Jean Allman's study of Hannah Kudjoe, Ghana's Convention People's Party loyalist, contends with women's historical erasure and marginalization within liberation movements by way of state consolidation.<sup>20</sup> Bringing forward women's experiences demonstrates how women found empowerment through participation in nationalist movements; however, in many cases, they would continue to struggle against their marginalization in the post-colonial state.

Scholarship highlighting the transnational networks which also contribute to African women's experiences in nationalist struggles build from these local studies. Barbara Bair's study on Sierra Leone's Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Cheryl Johnson-Odim's examination of Nigerian activist Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and more recent work by Naaboroko Sackeyfio-Lenoch on Ghana's Evelyn Amarteifio example how African women activists actively participated on the international front.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997); Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982); Tanya Lyons, "Guerrilla Girls and Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle" in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Jean Marie Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) 305-326; Elizabeth Schmidt, "Emancipate Your Husbands!: Women and Nationalism in Guinea, 1953-1958" in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Jean Marie Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) 282-304.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Allman, "The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History" *Journal of Women's History* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009):13-35.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Bair, "Pan-Africanism as Process: Adelaide Casely Hayford, Garveyism, and the Cultural Roots of Nationalism" in *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Verso, 1994); Cheryl Johnson-Odim, "'For their freedoms': The anti-imperialist and international feminist activity of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria" *Women's Studies International Forum* 32, No. 1 (2009): 51-59.; Naaboroko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, "Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana," *Journal of West African History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 27-56.

There is a need for more studies highlighting women from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, etc. in histories of Black women's internationalism. This lends itself to a critical reframing that influences the shape and meaning of Black women's internationalism. By attending to the many ways African women nationalists sought to build relationships with women in the U.S. and across the continent as part of their own visions for African independence, this study positions African women nationalists within an active international network of Black women leaders.

Taken together, these various fields have laid the groundwork for thinking about women, Civil Rights, and decolonization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They exemplify efforts by scholars to focus more on the political work and experiences of "smaller" actors and the ways they voluntarily and involuntarily collaborated with the State. This makes it possible to understand the many ways everyday people in various locations and varying socio-economic levels grappled with international developments. This dissertation aims to illuminate the multitude of voices, experiences, and methods of Black women activists' who, out of the political opening wrought by African independence, worked collaboratively toward their own self-emancipation. An appreciation of their labor goes a long way toward a more developed understanding of what the era of decolonization meant to Black women, underscoring alternative discourses and organizing about Black freedom.

### *Methodology and Chapter Breakdown*

This dissertation utilizes a transnational Black feminist framework, as defined by historian Carol Boyce Davies as one which "brings together the logic of the intersection between



pan-Africanism and feminism.”<sup>22</sup> Considering that the most persistent tenets of Pan-African activism are its heteronormative, patriarchal projects that are typically hostile to questions on women and sexuality, reconciling these masculinist constructions of anti-colonialism and nationalism remains staunchly vital in order to acknowledge the ways Black feminist framings can liberate such formations.

As such, this study focuses on the autonomous spaces Black women created for themselves in this period by analyzing Council organizational records along with personal papers, autobiographies, and oral interviews of Council leaders. Since many of these documents fall short of offering a full view of their international agenda, historical newspapers offer insight into the significance of their activism as well as the presence of African women leaders in the States whom they hosted. Since this project is concerned with the convergence of African American and African women’s histories, where personal papers auto/biographies are unavailable, overlapping existing literature on African women nationalists helps provide a more in-depth perspective on their joint efforts.

This study incorporates a biographical element to understand how their full lived experience motivates their activism. For Council leaders, considering the sanitization of civil rights leaders, the erasure of international activism within the mainstream, and the continued marginalization of these women within public memory of Civil Rights and African decolonization, the biographical approach recovers the many sites of their activism, especially those who were, at one point, further left on the political spectrum. This helps better understand their political journey and motivations.

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<sup>22</sup> Carol Boyce Davies, "Pan-Africanism, Transnational Black Feminism and the Limits of Culturalist Analyses in African Gender Discourses." *Feminist Africa* 1, no. 19 (September 2014): 88.

As founder of the NCNW, chapter one examines Bethune's lifelong interest and political engagement with Africa. She believed that African Americans had a role and responsibility in advancing Africa's interests and positioned her organization advocate for Black women's global interest in the postwar period. The Red Scare and the adjustments she made to survive it preserved their ability to stay active in the international arena and it shaped the ways the Council would carry out this work. Chapter two accelerates to Vivian Mason administration, which made significant advancements in the Council's Africa politics. They set forward a program which brought Africa's first women legislature, Mabel Dove, to the U.S. before the success of African independence movements. Dove's interest in women's activities and the racial climate represents African women's understudied solidarity efforts. Finally, chapter three focuses on events in 1960 including: Dorothy Heights tour of West Africa where she studied women's groups, and the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent (CWAAD) attended by NCNW representatives, among them Dorothy Ferebee and Jeanne Noble. CWAAD represents a highpoint in transnational solidarity efforts among Black diaspora women where they attempted to lay out the terms of their transnational relationships. The event is also evidence of the limits of patriarchal concession to women's political power. The conclusion will review the main findings and contend with the shifting political climate by the mid-1960s.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Mary McLeod Bethune and the Formation of NCNW's Africa Politics

In January 1952, near the end of her life at 76 years old, Mary McLeod Bethune accomplished her lifelong ambition to “stand erect, *in Africa*” when she arrived at Robertsfield Airport in Monrovia, Liberia.<sup>23</sup> In her message to members of her organization, the National Council of Negro Women, she wrote, “I should like nothing better than to see more of our alert, stable women looking across the great Atlantic...to join hands with other men and women of spirit, native and American, in the advancement of our sister Republic.” She saw in the west African nation the opportunity for African Americans to participate in Liberia’s economic growth, achievable by U.S. leadership. Fighting for an end to the social, political, and economic subjugation imposed on African American communities in the United States, she also understood these experiences to be replicated at a global level. As a Pan-Africanist, she affirmed the historical relationship between Africa and Black people across the African diaspora. She embraced the reality that Black people’s political futures were inextricably entangled. The stateswoman, activist, and educator, spent her life dreaming of visiting Africa. However, by the time she realized this great personal ambition, she had both advanced an anticolonial agenda and propagated U.S. Cold War interests.

“[L]ooking across the great Atlantic” towards the African continent shaped Bethune’s activism on the international front, inspiring her global perspective. As such, this chapter explores the political developments which nurtured Bethune's engagement with Africa

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<sup>23</sup> Emphasis in original; Mary McLeod Bethune, “Holistic Living: Yes, I Went to Liberia,” eds. Audrey Thomas McCluskey and Elaine M. Smith, *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World, Essays and Selected Documents* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 277.

highlighting the varied means by which African Americans thought about and engaged the African continent through the first half of the 20th century. Born part of the first generation of freed people after the Civil War, she witnessed the violent rise of Jim Crow, the most significant economic collapse in U.S. history, two world wars, the fall of European empires, and an autonomous Africa on the horizon. Within these developments African American activists continued to draw connections to Africa linking their fates in complicated ways. From the Black mission movement through the early Cold War, Bethune's life, leadership, and politics, offers an interesting lens from which to examine the place of Africa in African American politics. It also highlights the ways her commitment to Africa adjusted with these politics shifts.

Shaped by these collective experiences, Bethune believed that African Americans had a role and responsibility in advancing Africa's interests. She maintained this position throughout her lifetime, actively advocating for African causes by working with communists and other members of the political left to champion anticolonialism. However, throughout the 1940s, at a time when she began to establish an international network on behalf of NCNW, she also became a target of Cold War conservatives. In 1943, Martin Dies of the House of Un-American Activities, a powerful mechanism of Cold War conservatives, charged Bethune with "conduct intentionally destructive of or inimical to the Government of the United States" and again in 1947 cited her international activism, which included her role in the Council of African Affairs.<sup>24</sup> As such, she disassociated with her previous affiliates, pivoting further to the political right, in order to protect herself and her organizations. Bethune's engagement with Africa and her capitulation to Cold War conservatism to survive the Red Scare ultimately shaped the networks

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<sup>24</sup> "Action Awaited on Pickens, Bethune." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, May 01, 1943, pg. 8; "Prominent Leaders Linked with 'Reds'." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, September 13, 1947, pg. 1.

the Council later navigated to carry out this work. Moreover, her adjustments to the Cold War political climate also preserved the Council's relationship with federal government and maintained their primary role as Black women leaders in international affairs.

### *Background*

Ten years after the close of the Civil War, the state of South Carolina continued to grip tightly the legacy of the Old South. Maneuvering to return its Black citizens as closely to a position of servitude as possible, white voters signaled their disdain for Reconstruction by electing a former Confederate leader to the Governor's office. As a southern state not only with a majority Black population, but the largest formerly enslaved population, the consequences of a bondage economy were significant.<sup>25</sup> For example, in the 1880 Census, the illiteracy rate for Black residents 10 years of age and older 78.5% reported as unable to write compared to 21.9% of white residents.<sup>26</sup> Yet in Mayesville, located slightly over 100 miles north of the port city of Charleston, the McLeod family survived in a devastated economy that was once dependent on their labor, like many of their neighbors across the state. As a skilled laborer, Samuel worked as a carpenter and picked up odd jobs to supplement their income. Patsy worked as a washerwoman and a domestic for the Wilson family, where she was formerly enslaved. Like many Black families in the state and across the country, the promise of full citizenship and the actualization of their rights were objectives in which African Americans endeavored to hold the United States accountable. Born on July 10, 1875 in Mayesville, Maryjane, one of the first freeborn children to

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<sup>25</sup> The 1880 Census reported 604,322 Black residents out of a total population of 995,577 people counted. United States Census Bureau, 1880 Census, volume 1, Statistics of the Population of the United States, Table 1 Population of the United States by States and Territories, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1883/dec/vol-01-population.html>

<sup>26</sup> Miscellaneous Statistics, Illiteracy, Table VIII, Illiteracy by States and Territories: 1880, p.919, 920,924, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1883/dec/vol-01-population.html>

Samuel and Patsy McLeod would embody this determined pursuit for justice for Black people at home and abroad.

Maryjane's relationship and connection with her mother set an impactful example. Patsy's organization and leadership, at home and within the community, shaped how Maryjane thought about social responsibility, gender roles, and women's leadership.<sup>27</sup> Her admiration for her mother compounded by tales of Patsy's royal African lineage informed her earliest imaginings of Africa and served as a great source of pride.<sup>28</sup> During Reconstruction, land and education were specific concerns for African American social advancement. As a negotiator, Patsy helped the McLeod's secure an initial five acres of land from the Wilson's, an anomaly in the usual sharecropper arrangements in which many Black families were compelled. On their small farm, the family shared farm and household responsibilities as designated by Patsy. However, education remained an important ambition and she chose for Maryjane to go school. Patsy's hope for her children encapsulated many Black parents' strong commitment to education in the postwar South. In addition to communities' organizing and building their own schools, Black southerners also embraced the support of the Freedmen's Bureau as well as northern missionaries and philanthropists. Maryjane attended Trinity Presbyterian Missionary School on the condition that she would share these lessons with the household and neighbors. Patsy's influence and foresight laid important groundwork for Bethune's future.

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<sup>27</sup> Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune: Black Women's Political Activism* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 27-31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

### *The Black Mission Movement*

Outside of her family, she learned about Africa through church. While in Sumter, South Carolina, Bethune and her father learned from her sister, Sallie, about a great preacher in town. That preacher was the educator and Methodist clergyman, J.W.E. Bowen. As Secretary of Stewart Missionary Foundation for Africa at the Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, Bowen likely traveled to raise money for his institution as well as encourage African Americans to become missionaries in Africa. Historian Sylvia M. Jacobs notes that many ministers often “gave a distorted picture of the African way of life and brought back sensational and ridiculous stories because they either did not understand the culture, wanted to exaggerate their own achievements, hoped to capture and hold their audiences, or were attempting to show the need for continued missionary activity.”<sup>29</sup> Whatever the content, Bowen’s sermon engrossed then 12 years old Bethune who vowed to do her part in Africa’s redemption.<sup>30</sup> At 19 years old Bethune enrolled in the mission training school at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois in 1894. In her application she wrote, “It is my purpose and my greatest desire to enter your Institute for the purpose of receiving Biblical training in order that I may be fully prepared for the great work which I trust I may be called to do in dark Africa. To be an earnest missionary is the earnest ambition of my life.”<sup>31</sup> Considering that there were relatively few means to visit Africa, particularly for someone from Bethune’s socio-economic background, the combination of her religious centered education and her general curiosity must have made pursuing missionary

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<sup>29</sup> Sylvia M. Jacobs, “The Historical Role of Afro-Americans in American Missionary Efforts in Africa,” ed. Sylvia M. Jacobs, *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 18.

<sup>30</sup> Rackham Holt, *Mary McLeod Bethune: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

work ideal. As the only African American at the school, Bethune's missionary training involved singing, distributing leaflets about the school, and encouraging working class Chicagoans to attend weekly services at Moody.

When she finished her year of studies in 1895, she applied for a post in Africa; however, her application was denied. The onslaught of Jim Crow emboldened many white missionaries' disinterest in integrating their programs. Historian Ira Dworkin details that when Bethune submitted her application to the Northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), the group had recently made this very decision on the advice of white Lincoln University theology professor Robert Laid Stewart.<sup>32</sup> Further, historian Bettye Collier-Thomas also points to a sharp decline in African American missionaries by the early 20th century at the behest of European colonial officials who were both uninterested in granting African Americans equal treatment and threatened by the growing radicalism of Pan-Africanists from across the Atlantic.<sup>33</sup>

Though she did not have the opportunity to become a missionary, her initial interests in the African continent were nurtured during the Black mission movement's peak. In a period where European powers consolidated their control over Africa with the Berlin Conference (1885), colonial narratives in service of political domination projected Africa as a backwards place in need of civilizing. For the small number of Black elite in the United States, the possibility for social advancement at home was inescapably tied to the pervasive image of the "Dark Continent" as a measure of their humanity. As such, many believed in African Americans' divine responsibility to evangelize the continent since the fate of the African continent and its

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<sup>32</sup> Ira Dworkin, *Congo Love Song: African American Culture and the Crisis of the Colonial State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 109.

<sup>33</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014) 208.



peoples held great implications for the Black race as a whole. Other overlapping segments were concerned with Black people's political future in the United States and championed emigration to Africa as the only solution, such as African Methodist Episcopal church leader Henry McNeal Turner. While some Black missionaries often looked down on indigenous Africans and their cultures, others like Turner began to view Africa as a source of pride.<sup>34</sup> Historian Daniel F. Roth argues that "missionaries and mission publicists were essential catalysts in forming the Afro-American's image of his ancestral home."<sup>35</sup> For Bethune, this rang true. The Black mission movement oriented her toward an expanded perspective on Black life beyond the United States.

### *The Clubwomen's Movement*

New platforms became available to Bethune by the turn of the century which ultimately defined the sites from which she engaged the African continent. Utilizing the platforms of Black women's clubs, Bethune legitimized her leadership with her ability to characterize herself as representative of Black women as a constituency. Bethune's leadership within women's clubs opened additional roles within national, and later, international politics. The cementing of racial segregation by way of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision further compounded by growing industrialization, massive migration to the urban north, immigration, and escalated racial violence all made for onerous terrain for Black Americans to live and thrive. On the global front, the expansion of U.S. imperial (and corporate) ambitions in the Caribbean, Latin America, as well its former colony of Liberia, continued to link the fate of Black people globally. In this

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<sup>34</sup> Donald F. Roth, "'The Black Man's Burden': The Racial Background of Afro-American Missionaries and Africa," ed. Sylvia M. Jacobs, *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

context, Black communities waged various responses to push back against their subjugation at home and condemn American imperialism.

In the United States, Black women orchestrated various forms of resistance and articulated their grievances in protests of Black people's status, and also their own particular positions. Black professional women often participated in social organizations, such as the National Association of Colored Women's Club, which provided assistance and moral guidance to working class community members. They called attention to and organized around racial and sexual violence, employment, political power, among other issues they faced. Most importantly, they organized from a position that recognized the realities of being both Black and woman.

Within their activities Black women created opportunities for public leadership. White, patriarchal gender roles which relegated women to the private sphere of the home, while imposed on Black women, contrasted their lived experience. Black women's enslavement in the U.S. compelled them to work outside their home and still take primary responsibility for the home and family. The church provided one of the earliest formal spaces where Black women exercised their leadership. Anna Julia Cooper, educator and scholar, advocated for educating Black women in order for them to serve their communities and extend the work of the church. She also emphasized the importance of Black female leadership which she believed was beneficial to the church, the home, and overall, the Black race.<sup>36</sup> Her words highlighted Black women's effort to extend their leadership and give voice to their experiences within public life.

Through these efforts Black women defined themselves, as they sought to counter the racist and dehumanizing stereotypes of hypersexuality among other tropes. These stereotypes justified the sexual violence to which Black women were subjected. The issue of racial and

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<sup>36</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Printing House, 1892).

sexual violence impacted the entire community. Popular notions of white women's vulnerability to rape by "dangerous" Black men persisted despite the fact that it was the rampant rape of Black women at the hands of white men that was prominent. Black women activists such as Ida B. Wells launched anti-lynching campaigns through her journalism and traveling abroad. Historian Darlene Clark Hine points to rape, domestic violence and lack of economic opportunity as critical motives that influence Black women's migration from the south in an effort to regain autonomy over their lives.<sup>37</sup> Danielle McGuire conceptualizes the Civil Rights movement as an event that grew out of standing organized resistance to sexual violence that was primarily led by Black women themselves.<sup>38</sup>

Limited employment opportunities relegated many Black working class women to labor as domestic workers. Here too, the issue of sexual violence lingered as they were at the mercy of their employers. They negotiated their labor in efforts to ensure that they and their families benefited from their own labor.<sup>39</sup> They struggled against wage theft, physical abuse, long hours in big and small ways, such as pan-toting, striking, and quitting. They also created mutual aid and benevolent societies, unions, utilized churches to meet their needs. Black women organized for expanded employment opportunities for these reasons.

As U.S. citizens, Black people were continuously denied their constitutional right to vote. Jim Crow laws from poll taxes and grandfather clauses to open intimidation and death at the

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<sup>37</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-20. [www.jstor.org/stable/3174692](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692).

<sup>38</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women Rape and Resistance- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

hands of white vigilantes. Black women fought to participate in the political process. Though women in the United States gained suffrage through the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, Black women would not be able to fully exercise this right across the country until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. These collective concerns shaped the activism of Black women's clubs.

Bethune's participation in the club movement served as the main platform from which she exercised her broad interest in international affairs. As a result, she became a well-recognized leader within her own right. Beginning her professional career as an educator, Bethune joined a growing class of professional women dedicated to racial uplift. After meeting and marrying her husband, Albertus Bethune, in 1898, she had arrived in Florida the following year to take charge of a parochial school. Among her accomplishment, she is most known as the founder of the Daytona Literacy and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls (1904). Renting from one of the few Black property owners in the city, she opened the school with five girls and a \$1.50 down payment to support the needs of working families in Daytona. The school later became Bethune- Cookman College, one of the only Black serving higher education institutions in the state. In addition to her responsibilities related to Bethune-Cookman, she further developed her leadership skills in a number of roles within Florida and regional clubs, including serving as the President of the Florida Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (1917-1925) and as President of the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Club (1920-1925).<sup>40</sup>

Among her many organizational commitments, her time in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and International Council of Women of Darker Races (ICWDR) are significant. As president of the NACW, Bethune cemented herself among the cadre of African

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<sup>40</sup> Ashley N. Robertson, *Mary McLeod Bethune in Florida: Bringing Social Justice to the Sunshine State* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015).

American women leaders at the national level. The NACW was founded in 1896 and originally led by Mary Church Terrell. Leading the NACW from 1924 to 1928, Bethune collaborated with veteran African American clubwomen such as Addie Hunton, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Mary Church Terrell, and Nannie Burroughs, most of whom were also members of ICWDR. Though much of NACW's activities centered around domestic social welfare, historian Michelle Rief argues that many members traveled abroad in an effort to bring attention to the plight of African Americans and gain international support and through these efforts they learned that Black people share the similar experiences everywhere.<sup>41</sup>

During her tenure as president, in 1927, Bethune received the opportunity to tour post-war Europe on a fact finding mission alongside the National Medical Association. Bethune visited nine countries with the mission of increasing support for the NACW and Bethune-Cookman College. In her monthly message to NACW members, Bethune requested as many women as possible arrange to join the tour. She wrote, "If Ethiopia is to stretch forth her hands, then those hands must belt the seas, and to belt the seas, it is fitting that women of the N.A.C.W. should know from actual observation and touch, just how to go about their work."<sup>42</sup> In her estimate, this trip would offer Black women leaders and field experts the opportunity to study and observe comparable practices and (procedures) from which to measure their own. Her use of the popular Black nationalist reference of the biblical passage "Ethiopia shall soon forth stretch her hands unto God," signaled that she understood the work of NACW as labor which would

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<sup>41</sup> Michelle Rief, "Thinking Locally, Acting Globally: The International Agenda of African American Clubwomen, 1880-1940" *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 3 (2004): 203, doi:10.2307/4134075.

<sup>42</sup> "President's Monthly Message: Good Will Investigation Tour Abroad during the Summer of 1927" in *Building a Better World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), eds. Audrey Thomas McCluskey and Elaine M. Smith, 163-164.

contribute to elevation of the Black race as a whole.<sup>43</sup> In Europe, she met dignitaries, visited historical sights and towns and made note in her journal on the existence of Black life in Europe represented through artwork and places through which she traveled.<sup>44</sup> Travel offered an opportunity to learn, observe, as well as compare their racialized experiences to other people of color.

Bethune also participated in Margaret Murray Washington's organization, the ICWDR. The organization's members and leaders were also a part of NACW. As the first independent organization with an international focus among African American women, the group coalesced in 1924 under the direction of Murray Washington. As member Mary Jackson McCrory wrote in 1924, Murray Washington wanted to create the organization "for the purpose of studying the conditions under which each subgroup progressed, of disseminating knowledge of their handicaps and of their achievements, and of stimulating closer fellowship and understanding."<sup>45</sup> They focused primarily on education, encouraging members and the local community to learn about global communities. On one occasion, they heard from Adelaide Casely Hayford, Sierra Leonean clubwomen and founder of the Girls Vocational School in Freetown. She shared about life in Sierra Leone in effort to raise money for her school. The women supported her cause and Casely Hayford also became a member of the ICWDR.<sup>46</sup> Though ICWDR folded in the late 1930s, historian Michelle Rief posits that Bethune's own organization, NACW, is tied to this

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<sup>43</sup> George Shepperson, "African Diaspora: Concept and Context" in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, ed. Joseph E. Harris (Howard University Press, 1993) 41-50.

<sup>44</sup> Travel Diary, Box 2, Folder 11, Mary McLeod Bethune Papers, 1923-1942 [microform], Amistad Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>45</sup> Michelle Rief, "Thinking Locally, Acting Globally," 217.

<sup>46</sup> Kate Dosset, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008) 26.

legacy.<sup>47</sup> Participating in organizations such as the ICWDR positioned her among radical organizers as Black clubwomen made their own links to Pan-Africanism in the 1920s.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, simultaneously expanding in this period was one of the most influential Black nationalist organization founded in the early 20th century, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Founded in 1919 and led by Marcus Garvey, his slogan “Africa for the Africans” symbolized a significant underpinning of his political agenda: mass emigration for the establishment of strong and free Africa in defense of the Black race.<sup>49</sup> Despite the popularity of this Africa centered agenda, Bethune was largely opposed to Garvey's movement. She believed deeply that Black people should “resist the implication that we do not constitute a separate part of this nation.”<sup>50</sup> However, Bethune’s ideas about Africa and African Americans’ relationship to the continent did share some similarities with Garvey. For the southern educator and the Jamaican Pan-Africanist, Africa represented the ancestral homeland of Black people across the diaspora. As such, the continent’s redemption was a necessary component for the advancement of the entire Black race. By the second world war, Bethune also articulated a clear stance on self-determination.<sup>51</sup>

However, the nature of Africa’s redemption marked their ideological departure. For Black nationalists, such as Garvey, achieving economic self-sufficiency could be made possible through capitalist ventures utilizing Africa’s resources for Black people’s own benefit. Most

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>48</sup> Dosset, *Bridging Race Divides*,30.

<sup>49</sup> Tony Martin, *Race First: The ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Dover, MA: Majority Press, 1976), 111.

<sup>50</sup> Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune*, 173.

<sup>51</sup> Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 60.

importantly, the mainstay of Garvey's agenda included returning Black people in the diaspora to the continent through mass emigration. Bethune did not share these ideas of racial separatism. She participated actively in interracial conferences and eventually joined President Franklin Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet," an unofficial delegation of Black policy advisors to the president. Her own previous efforts to go to Africa were rooted in her curiosity and religious centered education, but she was not a proponent of mass emigration. Ultimately, for Bethune, full integration in the United States and full citizenship was a fight that could be won and thus, worth fighting.

In this period, Bethune transitioned from curiosity about global communities to organizing around overlapping concerns among "people of darker races." Through Black women's clubs, such as the ICWDR, she learned about global communities. Through travel, she interacted in real time with diaspora, as she also traveled to Cuba a few short years later. Considering the urgency created by the Great Depression, in 1930, she conceived of a politically centered organization of Black women who could mobilize around Black women's universal concerns. The NACW's focus on personal behavior did little to address political issues and the fading ICWDR primary focus on education both did not meet the pressing times. In this context, Bethune established the NCNW because of the need for a politically and globally centered organization of Black women.

### *The National Council of Negro Women*

Though it took several years to establish, Bethune convinced enough of her counterparts across the country of the value of a new Black women's group that would serve as their definitive voice. Bethune called together 29 of the most well-known Black women leaders of national organizations who represented established professional, fraternal, business, social



welfare groups. On December 5, 1935 at the Harlem Branch of the YWCA they voted to establish the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). The new politically oriented “organization of organizations” would lead collective efforts toward “united planning and concerted action for the economic, social, educational and cultural welfare of Negro women on national and international levels.”<sup>52</sup> At the Council’s charge, Black women would propel the advancement of civil and human rights.

NCNW comprised individual members, local branches, and national affiliates. Though Bethune aimed for the Council to speak for all Black women, regardless of class, the vast majority of members were middle-class, college- educated, business, professional, church leaders or homemakers. Women affiliated with fraternal organizations heavily influenced the Council. Their elitist image often dissuaded working class Black women, though Bethune thought of herself as a common woman. Membership was also open to women of other races as well as men who supported their programs. The national body was subdivided into regions. Led by a regional director, each region composed of local Councils would carry out conferences and programs as determined by the national objectives. On the executive level, the national president designated a national chairman for specific departments such as education, international relations, social welfare, citizenship education, youth conservation, among others and they worked in coordination with the executive committee. Finally, the national body would meet annually where Council women could discuss national concerns, host workshops and forums, determine Council activities and methods, among other administrative matters. At its height, NCNW touted

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<sup>52</sup> The Story of the National Council of Negro Women, Inc., n.d., Series 10, Box 20, F390, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

as many as 800,000 members. Overall, NCNW was a firmly moderate organization often taking a pragmatic approach by cooperating with ideologically diverse groups towards common goals.<sup>53</sup>

Between the Great Depression and the end of World War II, the unprecedented expansion of the federal government energized Black leaders to ensure that Black communities were not left behind. The severe economic downturn exacerbated the fragile state in which many African Americans already lived. In this period, Bethune and her army of Council women advocated for the end of segregation in government administration as well as expanded roles for Black professionals.<sup>54</sup> As a consultant for President Hoover, Roosevelt (and later Truman), Bethune led the division of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration allocated resources directly to impacted communities as well as championed for increased roles for Black women in the federal government. The Council helped accelerate Black women's leadership and vision within the changing contemporary moment on the national level, providing a model that they also pursued in an increasingly interdependent world.

### *World War II*

The second World War and the immediate post-war period significantly impacted Bethune's personal and political interests in Africa. The war devastated Europe and colonized peoples under its domination further pressed for an end to their subjugation. The likelihood of independent African states greatly influenced African American support for decolonization.

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<sup>53</sup> The National Council Of Negro Women: Origin and Purpose, n.d., Series 10, Box 20, Folder 390, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.; The Story of the National Council of Negro Women, Inc., n.d, Series 10, B. 20, F390, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C;

<sup>54</sup> For example, NCNW Founder Mabel Staupers helped advocate for more roles for Black women in the federal government, see: Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1890-1950," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (March 2003): 1279, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3092543>

Black activists, particularly on the left, had long made connections between their own oppressed status in the States and colonized people's demand for self-determination, but increasingly Black moderates took up this charge.<sup>55</sup> In 1943, Bethune informed Council women of the importance of global consciousness and concern for human rights advising, "the problems of oppressed women in far off Ethiopia soon become the problems of the women in our own community."<sup>56</sup> Among the multitude of players hoping to bend the postwar order toward their interests, her appeals for a strong international institution that would oversee a successful decolonization process placed her within the company of Black radicals and progressives. Bethune marshalled her organization to ensure that Black women were included in the organizing of international institutions and implementation of new policy that would ensure global peace, human rights, and women's rights. From these activities she elevated Black women's leadership from the national to international levels while developing stronger relationships with Black women abroad, especially in Africa.

Bethune's participation in the Council of African Affairs (CAA) evidenced the transformation of her politics. In 1944, she became a member of the CAA, one of the first African solidarity organizations. Formally known as the International Committee on African

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<sup>55</sup> See for example, Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals the NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Grace V. Leslie, "'United, We Can Build a Better World': The Internationalism of Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Council of Negro Women," in *To Turn The Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism*, eds. Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 192.

Affairs, in 1941, the newly constituted CAA became one of the foremost vocal advocates of anticolonial policies in the States. CAA leadership included ardent leftists and communists such as Paul Robeson, Max Yergan, W. Alpheus Hunton (son of NCNW charter member Addie Hunton), and W.E.B. Du Bois. They connected the struggle for civil rights in the United States to the struggle for liberation for colonized people in Africa and across the globe, frequently organizing campaigns around developments in South Africa, Nigeria, among others. The induction of liberal members such as Bethune attested to CAA's popularity. She decided to join the group despite just one-year prior fighting against an accusation of subversive activities by Representative Martin Dies of HUAC with the help of former NAACP legal counsel Charles Hamilton Houston. Her participation also demonstrated the importance of ensuring Black women were involved in any and all anticolonial efforts. With an explicitly racialized and gendered lens, Bethune joined the growing committee of African American leaders that linked African liberation with the struggle at home, while invested in learning more about the particular needs of African women.<sup>57</sup>

Bethune championed self-determination for African peoples on behalf of NCNW. From her desk at the National Youth Administration, she replied to a letter from Alpheus Hunton (CAA Director of Publication) making a statement for the record about the importance of closer relations between the United States and Africa. She remarked, "Innately, I am deeply interested in Africa. We realize that progress in one country should stimulate progress in another...It is, therefore, vitally important that some constructive thought and action be employed through which the people of Africa may have a chance for self-improvement made possible by a closer

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<sup>57</sup> Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) 17-18, 60.

relationship with us here in America.”<sup>58</sup> Suggesting that interdependence was a guarantor of progress, she linked the struggles in Africa and the United States.

Bethune made certain that NCNW participated in the series of international conferences and meetings for postwar planning. Like other African American leaders, she bolstered her hopes for the advancement of civil and human rights in the series of international meetings to result from the war, such as the Dumbarton Oaks Conference. Held at a Washington, D.C. estate, the meeting of world leaders came together in two phases from August 21, 1944 to October 7, 1944 to negotiate and form a postwar international organization- the United Nations. High level diplomats representing China, the United States, U.S.S.R, and the United Kingdom led the meetings. As a CAA member, Bethune participated in prior advocacy for the U.S. to advance African welfare and development as part of postwar debates, including serving as cooperating co-sponsor of CAA conference “Africa- New Perspectives.”<sup>59</sup> Bethune supported the CAA letter to President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Stettinius concerning the inclusion of a body within the new international organization which would oversee matters related to colonial peoples.<sup>60</sup> However, the Dumbarton Oaks meetings closed without any resolution on the question of colonial trusteeship, no proposal which limited colonial occupation or projected a path toward self-determination. The UN Charter established ultimately favored the priorities of its major players, the U.S., China, Britain, and the U.S.S.R. Most notably, despite the campaigns by

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<sup>58</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune to Alpheus Hunton, August 2, 1943, Series 5, Box 10, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>59</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 117-118; CAA Letter, March 31, 1944, Series 5, Box 10, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>60</sup> CAA letter to MMB, November 29, 1944, Series 5, Box 10, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 117.

groups such as the CAA and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) to defend the interests of colonized people, the UN Charter stated “Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter.”<sup>61</sup> To the dismay of anticolonial advocates, the UN had no authority to intervene in matters within “domestic jurisdiction” of sovereign states.

Bethune continued her efforts to involve Council women in the postwar planning. NCNW hosted a workshop “ “Wartime Planning for Post-war Security”, themed “Human Relations in the Transition to Peace” inviting representatives from around the world requesting recommendations from Paul Robeson for representatives from Russia and Africa.<sup>62</sup> The Council also participated in Eleanor Roosevelt’s June 1944 conference “How Women May Share in Post-War Policy Making” where Bethune joined the chorus of women leaders lobbying the State Department and President Truman for appointment to conferences and delegations.<sup>63</sup> She recommended diplomacy expert and Howard University professor Merze Tate and Panamanian-American labor activists Maida Springer for posts. Additionally, she sent the names of other Council women to participate in regional meetings sponsored by the State Department about the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. Clubwoman, economist, and attorney Sadie T.M. Alexander

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<sup>61</sup> Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 63.

<sup>62</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune to Paul Robeson, September 8, 1944, Series 5, Box 10, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>63</sup> Julie A. Gallagher, “The National Council of Negro Women, Human Rights, and the Cold War,” in *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, eds. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 83.

attended one such meeting, representing the Council as one of only two Black organizations, and reported back about the question of colonial people within the ongoing debate.<sup>64</sup> NCNW's public statement, "NCNW and Dumbarton Oak Proposals," continued to link the status of colonial peoples to the overall success of postwar planning and went on to bolster the CAA recommendation for the establishment of an International Colonial Commission within the framework of Dumbarton Oak proposal, urging for discussion at the 1945 San Francisco conference.<sup>65</sup>

In April 1945, the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO) convened in San Francisco, California. The State Department sent 42 representatives, none of which represented Black women. As the only official Black women consultant at the meeting of 46 nations, Bethune represented the NAACP along with Walter White and W.E.B. Du Bois as consultant-observers. Despite the fact that she could not successfully register NCNW as official consultant, Council women including Edith Sampson, Dorothy Ferebee, Eunice Hunton Carter, and Sue Bailey Thurman attended sessions as unofficial consultant-observers. Bethune insisted on women's rights along with the end of colonialism, as necessary transformations for new international relations. Collectively, they assumed the interest of subjected peoples.

The NAACP delegation as consultant-observers could not make any decisions on behalf of the U.S., but they helped push issues of race and anticolonialism. Their desired outcome for UNCIO included an international bill of rights with a provision against racial discrimination, and a trusteeship Council to oversee the process of self-governance. However, the official U.S.

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<sup>64</sup> Sadie T.M. Alexander to Mary McLeod Bethune, December 18, 1944, Series 5, Box 10, Folder 17, NCNW Papers, NABWH Papers, Washington D.C.

<sup>65</sup> NCNW and Dumbarton Oak Proposals, May 1945, Series 5, Box 10, Folder 17, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

delegation led by Secretary Stettinius did not pursue these concerns for the following reasons: First, the UN structure recognized only sovereign nations and not subjugated peoples. As such, a provision against colonialism undermined the sovereignty of colonizing nations. The importance of the Anglo-American alliance outweighed the rights of people in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Second, in order for the U.S. to ratify the UN Charter, the Senate would not proceed with the affirmation of racial equality. Third, pressure from the U.S. military officials who wanted to maintain their possession of territories in the Pacific annexed from Japan at the end of war continued to dissuade U.S. representatives from adopting language against colonialism. Though these specific provision on colonialism, racial equality and the like were not taken up, NAACP's lobbying contributed to a recommendation that the UN Trusteeship Council to oversee "independence or self-government." The UNCIO concluded with the signing of the UN Charter on June 26, 1945.

In her report of events, Bethune signaled a new direction for the Council stating that the group would "assume an international character."<sup>66</sup> The Council initiated International Night at their annual convention in 1944. Two years later, Bethune successfully submitted an application for NCNW as official consultant status with the United Nations (UN), a role filled by Eunice Hunton Carter, and also joined committees such as the UN Commission on Women.<sup>67</sup> The Council's participation in postwar planning helped accelerate Bethune's ambitions to bring Black women globally in closer communication for the purpose of ensuring their collective interests were not forgotten. In the spirit of interdependence, Bethune utilized NCNW's heightened profile and new connections to build closer relationships with women abroad,

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<sup>66</sup> "Mrs. Bethune Gives Conference Report." *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, June 9, 1945, City edition.

<sup>67</sup> Gallagher, 85.



especially in Africa. In 1946, led by Vivian Mason, the Council constituted an international relations committee, whose first project would be with Liberian women.

### Liberia

During a 1943 visit to the States by Liberian President Edwin Barclay, Bethune took the opportunity to extend greetings to the women of Liberia. In her letter, she hoped to “solidify the efforts of women everywhere who are working to secure a durable and lasting peace.”<sup>68</sup> It is possible that her own initiative to request from Paul Robeson representatives from Africa for the 1944 NCNW Wartime Workshop produced just the occasion. Sarah Simpson George, an educator and Director General of kindergarten schools in Liberia attended the October 1944 Workshop.<sup>69</sup> Educated, in part at Hampton Institute, George was wife to Samuel D. George, a member of the House of Representatives in Liberia. The visit presented a palpable opportunity to expand her network and study U.S. schools and educational systems.<sup>70</sup> During her short stay in the States, she met with Bethune, who likely introduced her to Eleanor Roosevelt leading to Simpson George’s reception at the White House. In November 1944, the NCNW and CAA hosted a meeting with Simpson George attended by numerous organizational representatives with interest in Africa. In her meeting with the Council and CAA, she praised the progress of women in the U.S. and shared about Liberian women’s accomplishments. She expressed hope

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<sup>68</sup> Ashley N. Robertson, “The Drums of Africa Still Beat in my Heart:” The Internationalism of Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Council of Negro Women (1895-1960), PhD Dissertation, Howard University, 2013, 138.

<sup>69</sup> “1944 NCNW Annual Workshop” in *What Kind of World Do We Want?: American Women Plan for Peace*, eds. Judy Barrett Litoff and David Clayton Smith (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000), 59.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Simpson George visit also recorded for purpose of medical treatment in 1944, “Liberian Educator Describes Needs of Her Country”, *National Negro Health News* (vol. 12 no. 4, October- December 1944) p.24

that African Americans would visit Liberia and share their professional knowledge and skills in service of the West African nation's continued progress.<sup>71</sup>

Invigorated by her new connections, when Simpson George returned to Liberia she published an address "An Open Letter To the Women of Liberia" in Monrovia's *Weekly Mirror* where she shared about her visit with Eleanor Roosevelt and leaders of women's organizations as well as her overall warm reception. In response, Liberian women's organizations reached out to Simpson George with gratitude for the overall success of her trip and especially for representing Liberian women and raising their interests abroad. Caroline R. Lewis, founder and president of the recently established Liberian Charity Society, Inc. wrote to Simpson George informing her of their activities along with an open invitation to participate.<sup>72</sup> Dianah L. Jones, secretary for the Monrovia Needle Trade School Inc. also wrote to Simpson George with thanks and requested her assistance in their participation in Liberia's upcoming Centennial celebrations to "show what the Needle women of Liberia is capable of doing."<sup>73</sup>

At least one substantive campaign resulted from Simpson George's meeting hosted by NCNW and the CAA. Marion H. Bluitte wrote to Simpson George on behalf of the National Sorority of Phi Delta Kappa, an international association of teachers, with interest in commemorating Liberia's upcoming centennial. Bluitte noted that they were "inspired" by her talk at the November meeting such that the sorority passed a resolution one month later at their national conference to establish a reading room for the children of Liberia and encourage

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Caroline R. Lewis to Sarah Simpson George, February 24, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>73</sup> Dianah L. Jones to Sarah Simpson George, March 6, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

members to accept President Tubman's invitation to visit Liberia.<sup>74</sup> They sought her assistance in coordinating this campaign with the Liberian government, to which she passed along to Dr. G. W. Gibson Chairman Centennial Commission.<sup>75</sup>

Simpson George wrote to Bethune in effort to continue communications with her new U.S. acquaintances. She expressed that "One of the mean and prominent features of my visit to America is that of having the opportunity of meeting, and associating with you, and meeting with the National Council of Negro Women."<sup>76</sup> Declaring Bethune the "Ideal Woman" and admiring her activism, she wrote, "Since my return I have not failed to tell my people and particularly the women about you and the outstanding contribution you are making to our race and a better world for all peoples to live."<sup>77</sup> She updated Bethune on the Phi Delta Kappa campaign to establish a reading room in Monrovia. George also shared the letters she received from Liberian Charity Society, Inc. and the Monrovia Needle Trade School Inc., along with local newspapers, so that Bethune might be aware of women's activities in the country and in return, requested to be informed of Council activities. Bethune responded warmly to Simpson George's letter emphasizing that "We want the women of Liberia to know how interested we are in them and all their activities."<sup>78</sup> She assured Simpson George that she would receive copies of the Council

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<sup>74</sup> Marion H. Bluit to Sarah Simpson George, March 4, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>75</sup> Sarah Simpson George to Dr. G. W. Gibson, April 27, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>76</sup> Sarah Simpson George to Mary McLeod Bethune, May 29, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>77</sup> Sarah Simpson George to Mary McLeod Bethune, May 29, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>78</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune to Sarah Simpson George, July 23, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

periodical *The Aframerican Women's Journal* and hoped she might help the Council in gaining subscribers.

In the immediate postwar period as one of three independent Black nations compounded by the upcoming centennial celebration, Liberian women were concerned with the pace of progress, and the political elite with the country's image. As a member of both groups, to this issue, Simpson George emphasized in an interview during her 1944 visit "We have learned many things in my country...and among the most important of our lessons is the realization that we cannot live in isolation."<sup>79</sup> She went to say, reiterating the importance of Liberia's success on the world stage, "we must not fail in building a working nation. If we do it will be a slap at all colored people, no matter to what nationality they belong." At a time when more Liberian women were gaining access to higher education, becoming politically conscious, and pressing for more political representation, projects such as her collaboration with Phi Delta Kappa to increase access to education as well as the opportunity for training and education abroad contributed toward the goal of "building a working nation."<sup>80</sup> Additionally, part of Liberian President Tubman's efforts of modernizing the country included "declar[ing] war against illiteracy" in 1948, which fit well within their plans.<sup>81</sup> Simpson George's course, as a lead educator, included increasing access to education by building schools "so that all people have a chance for a real education." The Phi Delta Kappa reading room project brought together her

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<sup>79</sup> "Liberian Educator Speaks of Country's 'New Women', *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, December 2, 1944, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News, 16A.

<sup>80</sup> Augustine Konneh, "Women and Politics in Africa: The Case of Liberia," *Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians* (v.14, 1993) 109, <https://archives.columbusstate.edu/gah/>

<sup>81</sup> His Excellency Mr. William V. S. Tubman, President of the Republic of Liberia in *Literacy, 1965-1967*, (UNESCO,1968), 30, UNESCO Digital Library, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000037480>.

ambitions of collaborative work and strengthening educational opportunities, and for the sorority it offered the chance, as stated in their resolution, to “strengthen the spirit of United Nations unity and especially unity among the Negro people.”<sup>82</sup>

However, for NCNW, the Phi Delta Kappa campaign illuminated the Council’s difficulty coordinating their umbrella structure and carrying out their program during this period. The national sorority was an organizational affiliate of the NCNW and Bethune wanted cooperation between programs and the national body, including affiliates. Explaining this structure, she wrote to Simpson George, “We would like to have our entire program with Liberia carried on through our national office, for it is in this way alone that we can have an international aspect to our organization. We are anxious that we study well our structure so that we can have a solid foundation for our international program.” She went on to ensure that she would coordinate with the sorority on their suggested program, indicating future Council involvement with the campaign.

The newly established relationship between NCNW and Sarah Simpson George underscored the kind of collaboration between Black women globally that Bethune hoped to stimulate through the NCNW. Most importantly, the feeling was mutual. The alliances Simpson George developed animated her to coordinate the burgeoning activities of Liberian women. In 1946, she founded the National Liberian Women’s Social and Political Movement. The new women’s group participated in NCNW’s annual convention the same year, sending Mary McCritty Fiske as an official delegate.<sup>83</sup> Simpson George continued to bridge her vision for

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<sup>82</sup> Resolution, March 4, 1945, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>83</sup> Robertson, 141.

Liberia's schools and educational system with international resources by accepting Phi Delta Kappa's invitation to membership in 1950.<sup>84</sup> The sorority granted her authority to establish a chapter in the country, and she led the initiative for the proposed reading room project. In 1951, the reading room housed at the Government's Public Library opened with over 700 books and audio-visual materials for Monrovia's children.<sup>85</sup> Similar to the Council, Simpson George and her organization not only met the material needs of the community, but worked to advance women's inclusion in Liberian public life.<sup>86</sup>

### Ethiopia

In March of 1944, the First Secretary of the Ethiopian Legation, Getahoun Tesemma, hosted a visit with NCNW. Sending a note of gratitude on behalf of the Council, Executive Director Jeanetta Welch Brown wrote to Tesemma emphasizing that "It has sharpened our desire to know more about our brothers and sisters in Ethiopia."<sup>87</sup> She offered to share Council literature and requested the name of a contact for a women's organization in the country so that "the women of Ethiopia might learn more about the Negro women of America and we in turn can learn more about them."<sup>88</sup> Brown hoped to share with members all that they had learned in

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<sup>84</sup> "Phi Delta Kappas make Sarah S. George Member." 1950. *Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)*, Jan 31, 5. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/531920278?accountid=14512>.

<sup>85</sup> "Reading Room Given to Children of Liberia by Phi Delta Kappas." 1951. *Courier (1950-1954)*, Dec 22, 12. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/202256119?accountid=14512>.

<sup>86</sup> In 1947, President Tubman signed into law suffrage for Liberian women. A longtime advocate of women's suffrage, the following year, Simpson George pushed for the inclusion in the amendment of the suffrage bill the right for women to hold any political position. See Angie E. Brooks, "Political Participation of Women in Africa South of the Sahara," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 375 (1968): 82-85. Accessed March 26, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/1037892](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1037892).

<sup>87</sup> Jeanetta Welch Brown to Mr. G. Tesemma, March 31, 1944, Series 5, Box 12, Folder 4, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

conversation with Tesemma along with information about Ethiopian family life in their periodical, so she also requested photos and details about Ethiopian children's lives and photos. Tesemma replied offering the name of Princess Tenagnework, daughter of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and president of the Ethiopian Women's Work Association (also referred to as the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association or EWWA).<sup>89</sup>

During this period, the state of women's activities was in transition as the country dealt with the aftermath of the Second Italo-Ethiopia War (1935-1937) and also fought successfully in the East Africa campaign of World War II (bringing Italy to a final defeat in 1943). EWWA was founded in 1935 by Tenagnework's mother Empress Menan Asfwe, led by her sister Princess Tsehai. EWWA was closely associated with the state and run by elite women, along with other civil organizations such as the Armed Forces' Wives Association and committees of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).<sup>90</sup> The context of Italian occupation and World War II is especially important considering that in 1937, in response to the attempted assassination of the Viceroy of Addis Ababa, Italian occupation forces massacred and imprisoned almost 20,000 people in the capital city (an estimated 20 percent of the population). Among the many terrible consequences for the city's populace, it forced many members of nobility into exile.<sup>91</sup> In 1941, once Haile Selassie (formerly exiled at the start of the war) was restored to the throne, many

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<sup>89</sup> Mr. G. Tesemma to Jeanetta Welch Brown, April 6, 1944, Series 5, Box 12, Folder 4, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>90</sup> Emebet Mulugeta, "Trajectories of Women/Gender Issues and the Current Status of Gender Mainstreaming in Ethiopia" in *Gender Mainstreaming Experiences from Eastern and Southern Africa*, eds. Matebu Tadesse and Abiye Daniel (Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa: Addis Ababa, 2010), 71-72.; Gemma Burgess, "A Hidden History: Women's Activism in Ethiopia," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14, no. 3 (July 2013): 98.

<sup>91</sup> Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), xlii, 274-278.

nobles began to return and Tenagnework assumed leadership of EWWA the same year. During the war, EWWA's activities primarily serviced Addis Ababa offering first aid to civilians, and after 1941, provided food, temporary shelter, and medical services to orphans and widows.<sup>92</sup> Gemma Burgess notes that these organizations were not designed to mobilize Ethiopian women as a whole.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, EWWA's case highlights the drastically different landscapes of women's activities in this period.

Bethune wrote to Princess Tenagnework relaying her desire to visit Ethiopia and informing her that "We, the National Council of Negro Women, are desirous of knowing you and your women better, and in having a closer cooperation with you in the work that women are doing in your country."<sup>94</sup> She extended the opportunity for the Addis Ababa based group to become affiliates of NCNW with the hope of sharing information with one another. Although the kind of "closer cooperation" between two groups did not materialize, Bethune and the Council leadership maintained their interest in how policies at the close of the war would impact the continent. The Council later "unanimously adopted" a resolution introduced by the Council's international committee that staunchly urged the United Nations to oppose any African colonies being returned to Italy.<sup>95</sup> As women of nobility, it also not likely that they would have shared the same concerns for social mobility; though, had a relationship with Princess Tenagnework

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<sup>92</sup> Emebet Mulugeta, 71-72.

<sup>93</sup> Gemma Burgess, 99.

<sup>94</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune to Princess Tenagnework, April 19, 1944, Series 5, Box 12, Folder 4, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>95</sup> For Immediate Release, October 15, 1948, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 15, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.



materialized, she would have been a powerful ally as a uniquely positioned Black female political representative.

### *Cold War Repression*

These activities on the international front saw another transformation at the onset of the Cold War. At the close of World War II stood only the United States and the Soviet Union as the world's great superpowers which scrambled for influence among emerging nations. The spirit of cooperation and interdependence which Bethune had lobbied to translate into policy had splintered. In the United States, those active on the international front were deemed participants in subversive activities, making Bethune and NCNW targets for anticommunist retaliation. As a result, Bethune shrank from her anticolonial agenda in favor of championing American democratic values and leadership abroad.

One of the most pernicious instruments of Cold War conservatives was the House of Un-American Activities. The committee within the House of Representatives was created in 1938 in response to increased leftist activity in the country, the committee identified individuals and organizations believed to be affiliated in any way with Communist activity- designated as a threat to the U.S. by the federal government. HUAC ushered in what became known as the Red Scare, destroying the lives and careers of citizens and immigrants alike. In a February 1943 speech in front of the House, Representative Martin Dies accused 39 government employees of subversion. Among them included Bethune, who at the time was still director of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration. Bethune was charged with "conduct intentionally destructive of or inimical to the Government of the United States" as a result of her civil rights

advocacy and affiliation with organizations considered communist fronts.<sup>96</sup> Represented by Charles Hamilton Houston, Bethune's defense including a letter writing campaign where "thousands of letters from 'friends at court' were received by the investigating committee led by John Kerr."<sup>97</sup> She even wrote a statement responding to Dies calling the accusation a "malicious misstatement of the truth" and a result of her "incessant efforts in seeking for all Americans the constitutionally guaranteed rights of full citizenship regardless of race, creed or color..."<sup>98</sup> She went on to say that the accusation would undermine U.S. war efforts as aid to the enemy. Even after the close of the World War II, Cold War conservatives continued to gain ground. The Federal Bureau of Investigation maintained files on Bethune and Council leadership, including Vivian Mason, Dorothy Ferebee, and Dorothy Height. Mason's travels to Russia and her affiliation with the American Congress of Women in 1946 caused great concern for Bethune who wrote to her and demanded she stop affiliating her activities with NCNW.<sup>99</sup> Though their personal relationship survived the censure and Mason later became NCNW's third president, the engagement is evidence of the ways Bethune conceded to the anticommunism hysteria.

Her concern was not unfounded, since in 1947, she was again listed by HUAC for suspected subversive activities.<sup>100</sup> This context also framed her decision to resign from the CAA,

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<sup>96</sup> "Action Awaited on Pickens, Bethune." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, May 01, 1943, City Edition. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/202129057?accountid=14512>.

<sup>97</sup> "Fight Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune's 'Red' Smear," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, April 23, 1943, pg.1.

<sup>98</sup> Statement of Mary McLeod Bethune RE Dies Accusation of Being a Communist, n.d., Series 5, Box 10, Folder 15, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>99</sup> Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune*, 188.

<sup>100</sup> Prominent Leaders Linked With 'Reds' *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Sep 13, 1947; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier pg. 1

which had also been listed as a subversive organization. Though the CAA gained credibility among African American liberals during the war, the Red Scare caused a schism that the group did not survive. In this period, Executive Director Max Yergan transitioned from leftist politics toward conservatism in the wake of HUAC developments.<sup>101</sup> In early 1948, Yergan wanted the organization to take a clear anticommunist stance; however, Chairman Paul Robeson was undeterred by the political pressure. The conflict between the factions ultimately resulted in Yergan's departure from the CAA that same year. Among a purge of members who followed Yergan, the remaining body elected Bethune as president, though she ended up removing herself from the organization in 1948.<sup>102</sup> In a political reversal, Yergan became an ardent anticommunist and provided testimony in the prosecution of CAA members and Communists. Though Bethune did not shift as far to the political right as Yergan, she strategically disassociated with the progressive spaces from where she once championed for self-determination, aiming to maintain her status and leadership as well as protect NCNW and Bethune-Cookman College.

The following year, the opportunity to carry the favor of the U.S. government presented itself in the form of the 1949 World Town Hall, a pro-American three-month tour of 12 countries. Bethune appointed Council woman Edith Sampson, chair of the International Relations Committee, to participate. As Sampson's first trip abroad, she joined the delegation of U.S. representatives composed of 26 national organizations who collectively espoused the

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<sup>101</sup> David Henry Anthony, *Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 228-230.

<sup>102</sup> "23 Dropped From African Council: Mrs. Bethune Elected to Succeed Robeson" *Afro-American* (1893-1988); May 1, 1948; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American pg. 3; Robertson, 120.

virtues of U.S. democracy shoring up the country's image overseas. Most importantly, to U.S. officials, members such as Sampson could mitigate critiques of the racial inequity to which she did so effectively.<sup>103</sup> To these ends, Sampson brazenly countered criticism by leftists such as Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker. Her performance was met with the endorsement of her counterparts who elected her president, where she continued her travels domestically to inform Americans about her discussions on the tour. One significant outcome of her efforts was her 1950 nomination by President Truman to be alternate U.S. delegate at the U.N.<sup>104</sup> Historian Julie A. Gallagher writes, "Although Sampson enthusiastically defended the United States, her reasons for participating in the tour were as much about the NCNW trying to defend itself against red-baiting, as they were about her own anti-communist beliefs"<sup>105</sup> Sending Sampson on the offense helped the NCNW image, and it also exhibited Bethune's embrace of U.S. global leadership-legitimized by distinguishing its racial problems from the rest of the world.<sup>106</sup>

Though this embrace, and its attendant Cold War agenda, seemed contradictory to her earlier commitment to anti-colonialism, it fits within Bethune's worldview. Her core belief was that African Americans had a role and responsibility in advancing Africa's interests. As a liberal, she saw the federal government as the guarantor of rights and believed in its ability and willingness to do just that. In the context of a shared global struggle against white domination and repression, Bethune advocated for the U.S. to ensure an expansion of democracy through its

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<sup>103</sup> Helen Laville and Scott Lucas, "The American Way: Edith Sampson, the NAACP, and African American Identity in the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 4 (1996): 565-90, [www.jstor.org/stable/24913319](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24913319).

<sup>104</sup> "Favor Edith Sampson To Battle Reds In UN Post," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967), August 26, 1950, pg. 1.

<sup>105</sup> Gallagher, 90.

<sup>106</sup> Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 146.



Figure 1. President William V.S. Tubman shakes hands with Mary McLeod Bethune (Photograph by R.S. Scurlock, Liberia Collections, William V. S. Tubman Photograph Collection, Indiana University, <http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/lcp/tubman/VAA7927-2027>)

participation in the war and by standing by those rights as part of the UN. Like many Black leaders believed, the expansion of democracy abroad would have implications at home. As such, U.S. global leadership framed as a struggle against Communism seemingly met Bethune's main imperatives of Africa's advancement and satisfying U.S. responsibility.

For Bethune, it was especially significant that her first visit to Africa found her in Liberia. Founded as a U.S. colony in 1822 by the American Colonization Society (ACS), the group facilitated the relocation of former enslaved and freeborn African Americans to West Africa. Their descendants known historically as Americo-Liberians ceded power over the 16 indigenous groups. In 1847, the colony became an independent nation when the Congressionally funded ACS struggled financially in midst of the U.S.- Mexico War. She highlighted this historical connection remembering missionary Lott Carey and theologian Harrison Ellis, as she explained to the readers of the *Chicago Defender*, "I was proud of being an American of African

ancestry in this nation founded by Americans of African ancestry.”<sup>107</sup> Her presence, as the daughter of formerly enslaved African Americans, now an official representative of the U.S. government personified the march of progress in which she perceived Liberia.

The landscape in which she entered had been a product of mutual U.S.- Liberian interests. Historian Brenna Wynn Greer unpacks this relationship in her analysis of African American entrepreneur and public relation professional Moss Kendrix’s role in the Liberian Centennial Commission.<sup>108</sup> In the context of the postwar world, both U.S. and Liberian officials were concerned with the country’s economic progress for overlapping reasons. For President Tubman, who had been considered an outsider to Monrovia politics, advancing the country economically was, in part, rooted in his efforts to shore political power among different factions.<sup>109</sup> Mainly by protecting the elite’s wealth and better incorporating the indigenous populations into what would be a new modern nation. To these ends, Tubman’s economic development plan, known as “Open Door Policy” encouraged foreign investment and also included a “Unification and Integration Policy.”<sup>110</sup>

For the U.S., Liberia had been an important ally during the war, serving as a main source of rubber and a strategic location for military operations for the North Africa campaign. However, the negative perception of Liberia and its social, political, and economic position, as

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<sup>107</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, “Trip To Africa Stirs Memory Of The Founding Of Liberia In 1822,” Jan 5, 1952, *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, pg. 10

<sup>108</sup> Brenna Wynn Greer, *Represented: The Black Imagemakers Who Reimagined African American Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) 110-141.

<sup>109</sup> Konneh, “Women and Politics in Africa: The Case of Liberia,” 109.

<sup>110</sup> Unification Day became a national holiday in Liberia in 1947.

Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it in 1945 were “of particular concern to us at a time when the problem of dependent peoples is under widespread discussion.” U.S. investment in Liberia could help buttress its legitimacy as postwar global leader. Greer illustrates how Kendrix designed a public relation strategy for Liberia to encourage U.S. investment. This was partly done by highlighting the historical connection to the U.S., portraying it as product of African American civilizing, emphasizing political control of Americo-Liberians. While this project met the needs of the U.S., Greer writes that Kendrix, “formulated U.S. interest in Liberia as a route by which African Americans might elevate their political standing and secure a seat at the table of postwar U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>111</sup>

Keeping with Kendrix’s successful model, Bethune’s 1952 reports of Liberia to African Americans back home, in the *Defender* and to NCNW, particularly focused on the country’s economic development and opportunities. Her duties over the course of the 10-day visit included meeting Liberian officials, visiting schools as well as major national economic industries. She met President Tubman and remarked at his popularity among Monrovia’s urban population as well as those in the hinterland. One of the high points was meeting 126 native chiefs who gave her a “real feel of Africa.”<sup>112</sup> She found the missionary work carried out in Liberia “remarkable,” excited by the opportunity to counsel and pray with native people as she had so aspired as a student at Moody Bible Institute.<sup>113</sup> According to Bethune, the people she

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<sup>111</sup> Greer, *Represented*, 120-122, 133.

<sup>112</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, “Mrs. Bethune Describes Liberia As 'Land Of Opportunity' For All,” Feb 2, 1952, *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, pg. 1

<sup>113</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, “Yes, I Went to Liberia” (1952) in *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World, Essays, and Selected Documents*, edited by Audrey Thomas McCluskey and Elaine M. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 274.

encountered wanted “spiritual help” and “technical help.”<sup>114</sup> She made note of Monrovia’s free ports for shipping and also visited iron mines, rubber, banana, and cocoa plantations. She hoped for more African Americans to join those already in the country engaged in business, agriculture, health, and education.

In her assessment the expansion of these areas was desirable because Liberia held many opportunities, but had few to participate. Bethune believed that economic development through foreign investment should be ensured by establishing a Secretary for Africa through the State Department and accomplished “without violence to the dignity and human respect of any man, or tribe or nation.”<sup>115</sup> Though Bethune understood well Liberia’s national history her reports avoided directly highlighting the country’s tortured history of social, political, economic exploitation of indigenous populations by Americo-Liberian elite and U.S. corporations. Instead, she emphasized Tubman’s success in leading the native populations, the success of missionaries, and the needs of the Liberian masses. Bethune’s portrayal of Liberia emphasized the continued need for African American labor and commitment to enable Liberian “uplift.”

Her trip to Liberia bookended a lifelong personal and political commitment to Africa. President Tubman bestowed upon her the highest honor “The Order of the Star of Africa” for her service to the continent. However, her words to the African American public through newspapers and to NCNW members exemplified the “exocitizing and trivializing” of Africa that pervaded the Black press during this time, as described by historian Penny Von Eschen.<sup>116</sup> Though she had

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<sup>114</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, “Mrs. Bethune Describes Liberia As 'Land Of Opportunity' For All,” Feb 2, 1952, *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, pg. 1

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Penny Von Eschen, 163.



retired from leading NCNW in 1949, Council leaders continued to pursue Black women's interests on the world stage into a new era of African politics brought on by decolonization.

### *Conclusion*

Mary McLeod Bethune maintained a commitment to the African continent that evolved along with political shifts in her lifetime. Drawing her earliest imaginings of Africa from her family and the Black mission movement, Bethune developed a deep interest of the continent that, in her youth, was based on notions of Christian civilizing and uplift. As an adult, she joined the ranks of Black clubwomen and founded NCNW as a politically oriented organization that centered Black women globally in 1935. But, it was her participation in ICWDR that exposed her to more progressive ideas about Africa and African peoples as the group advocated and learn about global communities. By World War II, with pressing demand for end to white domination, Bethune supported these calls as part of the Council of African Affairs and oriented NCNW to support women abroad. She advocated for the U.S. to take an active role in ensuring an expansion of democracy abroad through the war and to standing by human and civil rights as part of the UN. However, the consequences of these activities in the Cold War climate threatened her political career and leadership

Where she had once engaged Africa through progressive autonomous spaces such as ICWDR and CAA, the Cold War climate caused her to shrink from an anticolonial agenda and embrace the existing formal channels. Ultimately this allowed her organization to continue their international activities and engagement with Africa. In this context, Bethune's embrace of U.S. global leadership as a campaign against communism corresponded with her genuine belief in U.S. responsibility and African "uplift" as she advocated for African Americans to utilize governments initiatives to shape Africa's future.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Developing Avenues of Communication and Friendship During the Cold War

On March 1, 1956, NCNW's third National President Vivian Carter Mason wrote to Council friends, noted Pan-African, Nigerian leaders Nnamdi and Flora Azikiwe,

We are very much interested in developing avenues of communication and friendship with the women of Nigeria and the Negro women of the United States. There are so many areas of mutual endeavor and concern that we believe mutual assistance could be given so that women of both countries could benefit. The Negro women here need to know much more about their African sisters and to work more closely with them in the things they are trying to do. Our sympathetic concern for the aspirations of the African people should be translated into very practical projects benefiting those whom we ought to help.<sup>117</sup>

During her tenure, Mason composed numerous communications such as this to women leaders around the world in order to establish stronger relationships between the Council and their organizations; however, Africa remained important within her appeals. Leaning on this established relationship, Mason went on to request the Azikiwe's assistance in recruiting participants for a U.S. State Department program which brought women leaders from abroad to the States to learn about American women leaders in civil, welfare, political, and economic life.<sup>118</sup> By encouraging African women leaders to participate, from Nigeria and beyond, Mason advanced an ambitious program to foster stronger relationships between African American and African women. The "many areas of mutual endeavor and concern" included women's rights, civil rights, education, economic welfare, political representation and more. Through cross-cultural exchange and other initiatives, the Council championed an uncommon opportunity for Black middle class women at home and abroad to develop a more complex understanding about

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<sup>117</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Nnamdi and Flora Azikiwe, March 1, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, National Archives of Black Women's History (NABWH), Washington, D.C.; Nnamdi Azikiwe, at the time, was Premier of Nigeria's eastern region. He became the country's first president in 1960.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

each other's particular priorities and experiences in the early Cold War period.

The burgeoning African nationalist and women's movement sweeping the continent and the Council's mission to bring Black women together coalesced neatly in this moment. Mason corresponded with women leaders across Africa including South Africa, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria by utilizing the Council's network established by Mary McLeod Bethune, Mason's personal contacts, as well as through the Council's high profile leadership and members. In light of their long history engaging the international arena, under Mason's leadership, they aggressively pursued formal relationships with African women organizations and encouraged grassroots engagement with Black diaspora politics among their members and within the broader community.

From this perspective, their call for increased international engagement throughout the 1950s appeared inevitable; however, pressing domestic priorities at the time suggest otherwise. In the national news, African Americans continued to call attention to and demand redress for the long history of racial terror and economic inequality. Opponents met their advocacy with persistent racial and sexual violence. Headline developments in this struggle including the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision, the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the integration of Little Rock Central High School, among countless others gripped national and international attention.<sup>119</sup> The rapidly mobilizing Civil Rights movement presented a more likely venue for Council energy.

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<sup>119</sup> For more on the Civil Rights and international affairs see: Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Nonetheless, these events mirrored global struggles to loosen the shackles of white sovereignty. While the unrest on the U.S. home front constituted an international embarrassment to the U.S. government by undermining its case for democracy, colonial subjects escalated their agitation and demanded political autonomy in the midst of intensifying tensions between the U.S and the Soviet Union. As colonial empires fell, the competition for economic and political dominance between the remaining superpowers threatened to subsume emerging nations. On the African continent, decolonization and subsequent independence movements presented an opportunity for African people to determine a future of their own. In many cases, their fight for independence relied on a protracted Pan-African project which considered and attempted to consolidate Black people's interests globally. In this context, Mason's conscious effort to develop communication and friendship ties in this moment bridged African independence with that of their largely middle class, moderate African American women membership.

As historian James Meriwether asserts, events on the African continent during the 1950s, such as Ghana's independence, helped reinvigorate African American interest in Africa and increase pride.<sup>120</sup> He states, "African freedom struggles became sources of inspiration to African Americans, helping to reverse negative images of Africa, establish an 'African lobby' in the civil rights community, and reconfigure the role of contemporary Africa in the lives of Black Americans."<sup>121</sup> Buttressing events and time made this "reconceptualization" possible.<sup>122</sup> The Council's Africa centered and woman centered international agenda, advanced by Mason's leadership, preceded the successful wave of formal African independence. As such, this

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<sup>120</sup> James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 151.

<sup>121</sup> Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 91.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

underexplored feminist organizing is part of the contributing elements which stimulated broader community alliance with Africa in the late 1950s and 1960s.

This chapter explores how the Council shaped both membership as well as the broader African American community's understanding and investment in Africa, during the early Cold War, through press, programming, and partnerships. Even more, the Council served as emissaries of national and international politics for Black women at home and abroad. Keeping members informed about African political developments, cultural exchange, community programs about Africa, and partnerships with African women and other experts, represented early seeds of solidarity building which would sprout wildly in the coming years.

#### *Vivian Carter Mason*

Vivian Carter Mason was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania on February 10, 1899 to George Cook Carter and Florence William Carter, the sixth of eight children. At an early age, the family relocated to Auburn, New York, where Mason grew up. George Cook Carter, originally from Georgia, was a local minister. Her mother, Florence William Carter, from upstate New York, worked as a cook at Wells College. The Carter family's working class background and social consciousness indelibly impacted how Mason saw the world.

Mason recalled that her home life and childhood were replete with lessons about justice, strong religious training, and the value of education. In her oral interview, she remembered her parents' had a "very deep concern for the conditions of Black people."<sup>123</sup> Her parent's reinforced this perspective for their children through Black newspapers such as the *New York*

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<sup>123</sup> Vivian Carter Mason, Interview with Zelda Silverman, March 29, 1978, Part 1, Special Collections and University Archives, Old Dominion University Perry Library, <http://dc.lib.odu.edu/cdm/about/collection/oralhistory>.

*Age* and *Boston Globe*, which were readily available in the home. Her family's relationship with famed freedom fighter Harriet Tubman and her mother's efforts to organize a commemoration on her behalf, also helped cement these ideas and provided a powerful example of social responsibility.

After high school, Mason's educational and professional career followed the track of many African American women who were afforded the opportunity. Coming into adulthood during the Progressive era, Mason moved to Chicago to further her education in preparation for work in public life and advancing community interests. Graduating from the University of Chicago in 1925, she studied business, political science, and social work. During the summers, she worked in a rope factory as a union laborer, noting "all of the disadvantages of working women were manifest[ed] there."<sup>124</sup> With these lessons, Mason focused her professional career in the interest of community welfare. She went on to earn graduate degrees in psychiatry and psychology from Fordham University and a physiology degree from Hunter College.

Mason settled in Norfolk, Virginia after she met Trinidadian native, William T. Mason in Chicago and married in 1925. The couple had one son. William Mason's business in home insurance was successful, as such, Mason became heavily involved in women's groups in the city. She served as the Norfolk Chapter Presidents of NCNW and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., as well as countless other organizations. She eventually founded the Women's Council for Interracial Cooperation which, among many activities, organized fact finding tours to understand the conditions in which Norfolk's Black residents lived. However, these pursuits did not satisfy her for she longed for better work opportunities and to also remove her son from Norfolk's

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

segregated environment.

Returning to New York, Mason's professional career advanced tremendously. She originally began her career in social work at the YWCA in Baltimore. When she returned to New York in the 1930s, she worked for the Department of Welfare in New York City for seven years. Rising through the ranks, Mason became the Director of NYC Administrative Division. As a high ranking Black woman in the Department of Welfare, Mason gained the attention of many Black social circles which soon landed her in the upper echelons of club life, including NCNW.<sup>125</sup>

By the 1940s, Mary McLeod Bethune's fame, connections, and professional experiences, positioned the Council well to advocate for the place of Black women in post-war planning. By this time, Mason had become deeply involved with NCNW at the national level, with none other than Bethune as a mentor. In 1941, Council women elected Mason as national first vice president. In this role, she balanced local, national, and international priorities. Recruited by Bethune, Mason actively participated in international conferences and fact finding tours, particularly after World War II. Most notably, she represented NCNW in 1945 at the International Congress of Women's meeting in Paris. Two other African American women out of a total of 15 U.S. delegates attended, including leader in the Black Communist left Thelma Dale and Council woman Charlotte Hawkins Brown.<sup>126</sup> The meeting brought together women from 34 countries who established the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a pro-Soviet, anti-fascist organization. Mason joined its US affiliate, the Congress of Women, serving

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<sup>125</sup> Cassandra Newby-Alexander, "Vivian Carter Mason: Community Feminist," in *Virginia Women: Their Lives and Times vol.2*, eds. Cynthia A. Kierner and Sandra Gioia Treadway, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 230.

<sup>126</sup> Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 155.

on the executive board alongside Dale and Brown. Thyra Edwards, international social worker and member of the Communist Party, served as the executive director. Erick McDuffie observes that collaborations between Black club and leftist women demonstrate the increasing common ground they found during Popular Front period.<sup>127</sup>

After the 1945 Paris meeting, Mason wrote to Dorothy Bellanca and Ollie Okala about the lack of representation of Black women from Caribbean, South America, and Africa at the meeting.<sup>128</sup> In preparation for the 1946 International Assembly of Women meeting in New York, Mason requested the names of women she could reach out to in order to increase Black women's representation at the event. Ollie Okala obliged Mason's request, sending her names of women in South Africa and Nigeria who could be of service.<sup>129</sup> Mason thanked her stating, "Too long we have been separated from our people in Africa and now that the women all over the world are expressing their deep longings for freedom and progress, American women must exert every effort to help and inspire other women especially the women of the African continent."<sup>130</sup> From Mason's perspective, women in the U.S. had a special responsibility to assist women in Africa. It reflected, to some degree, early 20th century ideas about African American providential responsibility to uplift African people. However, Mason's viewpoint of this relationship transformed from "help[ing] and inspir[ing]" African women to one of "mutual benefit" as Africa's importance on the world stage elevated.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 155-156.

<sup>128</sup> Julie Gallagher, "The National Council of Negro Women, Human Rights, and the Cold War," in *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, eds. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jaqueline L. Castledine, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 87.

<sup>129</sup> Correspondence from Ollie S. Okala to Vivian Mason, February 26, 1946, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 300, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>130</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Ollie Okala, March 21, 1946, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 300, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.



During the fall of 1946, Mason toured Europe as part of the WIDF visiting Italy, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and notably, Russia. From Paris she reported to the *Pittsburgh Courier* about Eritrea's position formerly under the Italians and then under the British. Couched in anticolonial discourse describing the "yearnings of people all over the world for freedom and self-government," she supported Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie's 1940 declaration promising reunion between Ethiopia and Eritrea and understood this delay as an affront to the will of Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples, as she understood it.<sup>131</sup> In Moscow, she was the only person of color representative at the WIDF executive meetings.<sup>132</sup> In her reports to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, she defended the WIDF reiterating the need that it secure consultative status related to UN policy making organizations.<sup>133</sup> She defended Russia, speaking warmly about Russian women's participation in all areas of public life and how she was "struck by the utter insignificance of skin complexion" in the country.

Ethiopian Legation Charge D'Affaires Getahoun Tesemma invited her dinner. Tesemma hosted a visit with the council just two years prior. At the dinner, she expressed that "American Negroes have a great interest in Ethiopia, the country's development and its progress" and went on to comment that Ethiopian women "who suffered so severely at the hands of the Italian fascist invasion" should have representation at federation sessions.<sup>134</sup> Upon returned from her tour of Europe Mason went on a lecture tour to share with American public what she had learned about

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<sup>131</sup> Vivian Carter Mason Writes of Fight for Freedom From Military Rule of Britain by People of Eritrea," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), September 28, 1946, pg. 10

<sup>132</sup> Chatwood Hall, "Mrs. Mason Enroute, Home From Europe," *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003), November 2, 1946, pg. B1

<sup>133</sup> Chatwood Hall, "Mrs. Mason at Moscow Meet," *Baltimore Afro-American* (1893-1988), November 2, 1946, pg. 13.

<sup>134</sup> Chatwood Hall, "Mrs. Mason Enroute, Home From Europe," *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003), November 2, 1946, pg. B1

women of Europe and their efforts to rebuild after the war.<sup>135</sup> Mason's participation in WIDF and the Congress of American Women reveals a foray into the international left and Soviet sympathy, of which she later abandoned as a result of the Red Scare. Her travel solidified the idea that Black people's destinies were linked. Her reports to Black press outlets such the *Courier* and *Afro-American* signaled that she wanted these messages to reach the broader African American community since she learned that Black people will "never be free to enjoy the same rights as other men until all [Blacks] everywhere can with surety invoke those same rights wherever they may be."<sup>136</sup>

However, the rapidly intensifying Cold War climate brought these activities under great scrutiny. Bethune wrote to Mason the same year demanding she "cease immediately using the National Councils name in any activities or speeches."<sup>137</sup> In this moment, the Council attempted to toggle between anti-colonial politics and the weight of Cold War conservative criticism.<sup>138</sup> Still, even in an increasingly hostile climate, in 1953 Mason took the helm of NCNW as its third National President and ambitiously expanded her global aspirations for Black women.

### *Developing Communication Channels*

Under Mason, NCNW strengthened their capacity to serve as bridge builders among Black women at the national and international levels, in the same way they had established themselves as bridge builders for race relations. When Bethune succumbed to her failing health in 1955, Mason, left with full control of the organization, transformed the Council's international

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<sup>135</sup> Mrs. Vivian Mason Back From Europe," *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, December 7, 1946, pg. 8

<sup>136</sup> Cassandra Newby-Alexander, "Vivian Carter Mason: Community Feminist," 235.

<sup>137</sup> Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune*, 188.

<sup>138</sup> Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017),187.

agenda. At the executive level, many leaders' exposure to international developments varied drastically from their general members and the wider community. Like Mason, executive members not only wrote about these events, many also participated in this discourse through various international organizations. By fortifying relationships with African women leaders and their groups, the Council continued to elevate African American women's experiences on the world stage as well as facilitate opportunities for Black women to collaborate with one another. Furthermore, these collaborations brought international affairs to the local level further stimulating diaspora consciousness.

The International Relations Department (IRD) functioned as the core engine of this work. The Council established this working group in 1946 to lead relevant programs as they sought out increased opportunities to participate in international discourse about post-war planning. Bethune personally invited specific Council members and local experts on international affairs to join the first meeting held on January 28, 1946.<sup>139</sup> The committee's purpose was to develop a program of education to "create better understanding" among women in foreign countries. As part of the executive committee and commissioned by Bethune to participate in international fact-finding tours at the time, Mason was a likely candidate to lead the IRD.<sup>140</sup> In their first meeting, the committee proposed local "international nights" to be held at the NCNW headquarters which emphasized "study groups, current events, languages, and general conditions in relation to the welfare of the people in our neighboring countries."<sup>141</sup> They suggested these events include representatives from foreign countries and discussion about women's experiences.

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<sup>139</sup> International Committee Meeting, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>140</sup> Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together*, 190.

<sup>141</sup> International Committee Meeting, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 14, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

The first event, scheduled for March 1, 1946, highlighted the West Indies. As such, Mason and the committee outlined a program that was primarily social in nature, offering general members and the community an accessible foray into international affairs.

Under Mason's administration as national president, Edith Sampson chaired the department and served in this capacity until 1958. A Chicago attorney, Bethune previously appointed Sampson to represent the Council as a member of the U.S. State Department's 1949 World Town Hall Seminar Group, defending American democracy.<sup>142</sup> The IRD would eventually be chaired by attorney, daughter of NCNW charter member, and Pan-Africanist, Eunice Hunton Carter. Notable members of the committee also included executive committee members Jeanne Noble, Elsie Austin, former U.N. observer Marian Croson, and former national president Dorothy Ferebee. Despite the negative impact of McCarthyism, by the early 1950s, the department continued its efforts. Reaching out to Black women abroad to increase international connections in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa- especially the latter- took a central focus.

Within the first six months of Mason's presidency, the IRD strategized, in an April 1954 meeting, the Council's participation in "practical programs" regarding international relations. Members suggested creating international institutes "for thinking and resolving international problems," a new UN observer, foreign scholarships for students, foreign workshops in cooperation with women's organizations and local governments in Panama, West Indies, Africa, and establishing a foreign exchange program for the same areas. The group also proposed establishing a column in NCNW's monthly newsletter to "stimulate interest on the part of

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<sup>142</sup> Gallagher, 90-92.; Helen Laville and Scott Lucas, "The American Way: Edith Sampson, the NAACP, and African American Identity in the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 20, Issue 4, October 1996, 565-590.

women's groups in other lands." Other than the regional institutes, the group moved forward with their plans with heavy emphasis on promoting international events in local Councils.<sup>143</sup>

The IRD organized a two-day international affairs workshop at NCNW's 19th Annual Convention. The program, "Women United to Understand and Help the Peoples of Africa," was held in November 1954 in Washington, D.C.<sup>144</sup> Howard University Professor of History, Dr. Rayford Logan gave the keynote entitled "The Picture in Africa Today." The committee extended invitations to representatives from South Africa, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Liberia, and Ethiopia to serve as special consultants. Notable attendees included Mary McLeod Bethune, Nigeria's Flora Azikiwe and Babs Fafunwa, and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. IRD chair Edith Sampson said of the event "This is a most vital topic in today's world and it is very essential that Council women become informed about the people of Africa, their progress and problems."<sup>145</sup> Bringing together a cadre of academics, ambassadors, African students, foreign service members, as well as Council members who had traveled abroad, the workshop gave general members an opportunity to engage knowledgeable sources on Africa through small group conversation and question and answer periods. At the end of the convention, the Council voted to make formal ties with women in Africa.<sup>146</sup>

### Press

The April 1954 IRD meeting also established a subcommittee for the purpose of creating a column in *Telefact* specifically about Council news for women's organizations abroad. They

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Plans for the International Program of the 19th Annual Convention, October 11, 1954, Series 7, Box 9, Folder 3, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>145</sup> Convention News Press Release, October 21, 1954, Series 7, Box 12, Folder 6, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>146</sup> Grant, 189.

designated contacts in Africa, the West Indies, and Central America. With the intention of reaching these members and local newspapers, the monthly newsletter served as a convenient vehicle for sharing information about relevant Council activities.

*Telefact* helped transform the Council's ability to communicate with members and affiliates. Beginning in June of 1943, the monthly newsletter consolidated news, reports, and call-to-actions and could be much more quickly distributed, unlike their quarterly *Aframerican Woman's Journal*.<sup>147</sup> The journal began in 1940 was the primary outward facing communication for NCNW. It was originally the brainchild of council member Sue Bailey Thurman, who also served as the editor. From its very first issue, historian Grace Leslie describes, "moving seamlessly from the local to the international, from campaigns primarily addressing racial equality *Aframerican Women's Journal* announced that the NCNW's fight against racism and sexism transcended national boundaries."<sup>148</sup> Madie Hall Xuma wrote to the Council in 1946 grateful for these communications. Xuma, described by historian Iris Berger as "among the most prominent African Americans to live in South Africa" was an African American educator from North Carolina who married the prominent physician Dr. A. B. Xuma, soon to be president of the African National Congress.<sup>149</sup> Hall Xuma who moved to South African six years earlier became a well-known organizer who helped reestablish the Women's League of the African National Congress.<sup>150</sup> To the Council she wrote, "It really is an inspiration to our people here to know and learn about Negroes overseas. These articles coming through are very helpful to me for I am able

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<sup>147</sup> The Council renamed *The Aframerican Woman's Journal* to *Women United* in 1949.

<sup>148</sup> Leslie, "'United, We Can Build a Better World,'" 194.

<sup>149</sup> Iris Berger, "An African American 'Mother of the Nation': Madie Hall Xuma in South Africa, 1940-1963," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 547. [www.jstor.org/stable/823315](http://www.jstor.org/stable/823315).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

to show them and tell them of current news about our people there [in the] U.S.”<sup>151</sup>

*Telefact* became the primary communication tool of the Council during the 1950s when they temporarily suspended the *African American Women's Journal's* production due to a lack of editorial leadership and recommended that the monthly bulletin be distributed in larger quantities.<sup>152</sup> By the 1950s, UN observer Marian Croson informed members about international developments on the pages of *Telefact*. Maintaining a distinct anti-colonial perspective, Croson helped members understand the “similarities between the abuses of colonial power in Africa and racism in the United States,” as historian Julie A. Gallagher asserts.<sup>153</sup> Croson also highlighted the pace of women’s rights and human rights movements, encouraging women that they can secure these rights through their own determination.<sup>154</sup> The newsletter served as an accessible source of critical information for the Council’s agenda.

Additionally, the Council engaged external communication channels such as the mainstream Black press as a means of stimulating the broader community in relation to African developments. A vital institution of African American communities, Black newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender*, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, and *The New York Amsterdam*, for example, offered critical commentary about local, national, and international news. Mason hoped to increase coverage of Council activities and Africa related news when she wrote to the *Afro-American's* publisher Dr. Carl J. Murphy in 1956. Though not stated explicitly in Murphy’s letter, it is likely that Mason inquired about writing a series

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<sup>151</sup> Correspondence from Madie Hall Xuma to National Council of Negro Women, 1946, Series 5, Box 18, Folder 300, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>152</sup> General Correspondence, 1950s, Series 4 Box 28, FL 195605, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>153</sup> Gallagher, 92.

<sup>154</sup> Gallagher, 93.

specifically related to developments on the African continent. Unable to commission the series, Murphy informed her that he was actively learning about the pace of decolonization and African nationalists throughout the continent, stating “we are aware of what's going on now among our African brethren and how important will be its effect upon the color situation in our own country.” He offered Mason some reprieve by ensuring her that “from time to time, I shall be glad to give such publicity as you think will be helpful to the National Council of Negro Women and to your work.”<sup>155</sup> Similar to Bethune’s column in the *Chicago Defender*, through this effort, Mason hoped to promote the importance of African decolonization in the everyday lives of African Americans.

Mason’s motivation to fold the Council’s Africa related international work into everyday life materialized in other ways. NCNW’s primarily middle and upper class membership comprised numerous professional Black women renowned in public life. As such, their professional careers, connections, and capabilities often worked to the advantage of Council goals. To this end, Mason called on her friend, noted journalist, professor, and NCNW lifetime member, Marguerite Cartwright for assistance. Cartwright’s contributions in the Cold War era as a writer and expert on international affairs has yet to be fully explored.<sup>156</sup>

A New England native, Marguerite Cartwright was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1910. For her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, she attended Boston University and, later, New York University for her doctorate. She became a professor of education and sociology at Hunter College. In “The Africa Unit,” published in *The Social Studies* in 1953, Cartwright questioned

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<sup>155</sup> Correspondence from Carl J. Murphy to Vivian Mason, May 21, 1956, Series 4, Box 28, Folder 195605, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>156</sup> Outside of her own publications and Black press coverage of her work during the 1950s, there is little scholarly investigation about Marguerite Cartwright, considering her notoriety at the time.



what New York school children understood about the African continent and the lack of complexity with which the subject is taught. Though unsurprised by their negative and stereotypical descriptions, this matter concerned her. By “build[ing] democratic attitudes and encourag[ing] critical thinking,” Cartwright opined that the atomic age rendered it necessary to move away from these limited ideas in order to equip youth to engage “the one world of the future.”<sup>157</sup> Indeed, the rest of her professional career reflected this mission to bring home international affairs and reconceptualize popular ideas about Africa in order to prepare her community for the changing world.

Outside of the classroom, the professor turned journalist traveled extensively becoming a noted press member. She maintained memberships in the Overseas Press Club of America and the United Nations Correspondents Association as a UN and foreign correspondent for both Black and white publications.<sup>158</sup> In her weekly column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, she detailed happenings at the United Nations with special attention to the West Indies and Africa related developments.<sup>159</sup> Her work included an open letter to Kwame Nkrumah, critique of UN policies that contributed to ineffectiveness, and general information about important political leaders and decisions. For some, these developments might have seemed worlds apart from everyday realities; however, Cartwright emphasized the far reaching impact of these debates by highlighting the role and influence of African Americans and other people of color.

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<sup>157</sup> Marguerite Cartwright, "The African Unit," *Social Studies* 44, no. 7 (Nov 01, 1953): 264.

<sup>158</sup> Marguerite Cartwright, [n.d.], Series 7, Box 2, Folder 17, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>159</sup> Marguerite Cartwright, "Around the U.N.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 24, 1955, pg. A8; Marguerite Cartwright, "You and the UN: Marguerite Cartwright," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 5, 1955, pg. A8; Marguerite Cartwright, "Around the U.N.," *Pittsburgh Courier (1955-1966)*, March 30, 1957, pg. A5; Marguerite Cartwright, "World Backdrop ...: PITTSBURGH, U.S.A.," *Pittsburgh Courier (1955-1966)*, July 12, 1958, pg. A6.

Her travels in the 1950s placed her at the forefront of debates on decolonization and the place of people of African descent on the world stage. Cartwright witnessed events including the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, 1956 Suez Crisis in Egypt, Ghana's independence in 1957, and the All African Peoples Conference held in Ghana in 1958, to name a few. In June of 1956, she set out on her second tour of West Africa on a special invitation from the Gold Coast Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, with whom she connected with the year prior through Lincoln University President, Horace Mann Bond.<sup>160</sup> She lectured throughout Ghana's schools and colleges, including the premier University College at Achimota. She also covered the upcoming Gold Coast election for several U.S. and foreign publications, where the re-election of Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party would determine the direction of a colony at the brink of full independence. In addition to these activities, her duties included interviewing important local and national leaders in both Ghana and Nigeria, where she traveled as a guest of Nnamdi and Flora Azikiwe.<sup>161</sup> Cartwright forged a strong relationship with these leaders remaining a close confidant of Nkrumah and even earned a street named after her at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka campus.

She became a sought after lecturer also touring the U.S. offering insight about these developments. After Bandung, universities, churches, and women's groups, including NCNW

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<sup>160</sup> Correspondence from Horace Mann Bond to Kwame Nkrumah, March 2, 1955, Marguerite Cartwright, Horace Mann Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b009-f073>.

<sup>161</sup> "Educator To Give Lectures In Africa," *Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)*, June 23, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Philadelphia Tribune, pg. 6; "Marguerite Cartwright To West Africa," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, June 30, 1956, pg. 6; "Dr. Cartwright Sees Social Side of Africa," *Afro-American (1893-1988)*, September 22, 1956, pg. 10; "Dr. Cartwright Reports Of Gold Coast Election," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, September 19, 1956, pg. 4.

affiliates, often recruited Cartwright to share her experiences.<sup>162</sup> She made ten appearances for NCNW's Brotherhood Week in Chicago, a series of locally hosted themed social events that encourage intergroup fellowship.<sup>163</sup> Her lectures drew comparisons about the experiences of African Americans and African people as well as the status of women. In a lecture hosted by Howard University's Faculty Women's Club, she informed the mother-daughter audience about the challenges West African women faced and women's universal desire for peace and progress.<sup>164</sup>

While her lectures were generally informative in nature, she did not shy away from critiquing U.S. government's influence in Africa asserting "Americans, even those in our State Department, do not seem to think it is important to discover what the African himself is thinking...This is very much like the disposition of many whites in America who consult other whites as to what is best for the American Negro. They seem to be allergic to what the Negro himself thinks."<sup>165</sup> For Cartwright, the risk of Black people's (and Black women's) exclusion from decision making not only aided Communist interest, but inhibited universal progress.

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<sup>162</sup> Alma A. Polk, "Dr. Cartwright Speaks For B. and P. Women," *Pittsburgh Courier (1955-1966)*, May 14, 1955, pg. 11; "Clubwomen's Luncheon To Feature Educator," *Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)*, October 4, 1955, pg. 7.; "Communism Was No Issue At Bandung," *Pittsburgh Courier (1955-1966)*, May 28, 1955, pg. 1; Ligayo Fruto, "Chicago Reporter Gives Views on Bandung Meet," May 2, 1955, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, Marguerite Cartwright, Horace Mann Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b009-f073>.

<sup>163</sup> Correspondence from Marguerite Cartwright to Horace Mann Bond, March 19, 1956, Horace Mann Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b009-f073>; *Telefact*, January 1954, Series 13 Box 2 Folder 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>164</sup> "University Week-end," *Los Angeles Sentinel (1934-2005)*, July 30, 1959, pg. B4.

<sup>165</sup> "U. S. A. Making Same Mistakes In Africa as She Does Here!," *Pittsburgh Courier (1955-1966)*, June 14, 1958, pg. 2.

Cartwright and her many columns were generally well received as evidenced by public response, the frequency of her lectures, and the extensive coverage of her activities.

Though Cartwright's travels, lectures, and writing were not always official NCNW work, she and Vivian Mason stayed in communication about these activities. On several occasions, Mason requested that Cartwright attend meetings about international affairs, especially related to Africa, on behalf of the Council. The Council's international agenda benefited greatly from Cartwright's insight and representation on the world stage through her extensive experience as a journalist, an expert on Africa, and her relationships with African leaders in service of the Council's effort to build stronger ties with women in Africa. Mason commissioned Cartwright not only because she trusted her, but she saw her as a qualified professional to speak on behalf of NCNW.

Mason wrote to her, "We are very proud of you and the many opportunities you have to interpret world events. This is very significant for we must have our women able to speak authoritatively on other subjects than the 'race problem.'"<sup>166</sup> In February of 1957, Mason appointed Cartwright as the official NCNW representative at Ghana's upcoming independence celebration.<sup>167</sup> Months later, the *Chicago Defender* ran an article titled "Ghana Women Hear NCNW Dr. Cartwright," conveying a special message from the National Council of Negro Women to the women of Ghana "extending warmest good wishes as they move forward into a new life of National Independence."<sup>168</sup> The article mentioned possible plans for "a joint

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<sup>166</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Marguerite Cartwright, March 20, 1956, Series 7 Box 13, Folder 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>167</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Marguerite Cartwright, February 19, 1957, Series 7 Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>168</sup> "Ghana Women Hear NCNW President Dr. Cartwright." *The Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1957, p.6.

conference with the women of Africa and the National Council of Negro Women within the next two years to further mutual aspirations. With fixed attention on the rapidly shifting political climate generated by decolonization on the African continent, the African American women's club remained particularly interested in the relation of these political developments to African women. NCNW women such as Cartwright were the many emissaries helping to bridge Black women globally, in person and in print.

### *Forging Friendship Ties*

#### Programs and Partnerships

Mason declared an Africa centered international agenda an explicit priority of the Council during her second term as president. In her 1955 President's Address, she stated that part of the organization's upcoming responsibilities included "reaching across the seas to help and work with the women of Africa and the island of the seas."<sup>169</sup> However, in the context of the early Cold War, the Council recognized that Cold War conservatism impacted their ability to advance this program. Acquiescing to this climate offered an opportunity to continue their mission. The Council's legacy, especially aided by Edith Sampson's primary role in the 1949 World Town Hall Tour, helped foster a strong relationship with the U.S. State Department. As such, they carried out much of their international agenda within the confines of State interests, which impacted the nature of their programming and partnerships during Vivian Mason's administration. Consequently, in this period, their engagement with Africa advanced at the local and executive levels.

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<sup>169</sup> *Telefact*, January 1955, Series 13 Box 2 Folder 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

With an intensifying Cold War, the State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA) were the main apparatuses of front facing U.S. foreign policy. The State Department primarily dealt with foreign governments through traditional diplomacy and also coordinated cultural exchange programs under the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The newly elected President Dwight D. Eisenhower, dedicated to fighting the Cold War, was keenly interested in public diplomacy. The USIA was created in August 1953 through consolidation of all existing entities related to foreign information and it was responsible for swaying the peoples of foreign lands away from the ills of communism, winning their favor toward U.S. democracy and capitalism. The agency paid special attention to the decolonizing world and carried much its campaigns through mass media including print, public broadcasts, motion picture and other means.<sup>170</sup>

The USIA also operated field offices around the world under the United States Information Service. By the late 1950s, Africa programming became a “major Agency task.”<sup>171</sup> Council women Elsie Austin resigned from her position as Executive Director of NCNW to accept to USIA post as Assistant Cultural Affairs officer in Nigeria coordinating women’s programs in 1960.<sup>172</sup> Prior to her position at the Council, Austin lived in Morocco for four years as a teacher at the American School of Tangier. Though Austin was stationed in Nigeria her

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<sup>170</sup> Jason C. Parker, *Hearts, Minds, Voices: U.S. Cold War Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016) 67-78; Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 81-133.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>172</sup> Alice Dunnigan, “Miss Austin to accept Federal post in Africa,” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*, Jan 16, 1960, pg. 12

work extended to Liberia, Ghana, and Togo. Explaining their reasons for choosing Austin, a USIA representative cited the agency's awareness that "there is a tremendous interest among women in Africa of what women in the United States are doing" and they believed Austin would be "welcomed in African countries."<sup>173</sup> She hoped this role would afford her the opportunity develop relationships between women in Nigeria and the U.S. The USIA also funded the Africa-American Institute and its subdivision, the Women's Africa Committee of which NCNW played an active role in its early activities.<sup>174</sup> Considering NCNW's role in advocating for increased roles for Black women in the federal government, and later Black professionals in foreign affairs, it is without coincidence that the Council leaders were identified for these opportunities.

The Council's established relationships with South African women prepared them for their first opportunity to provide practical assistance to African women.<sup>175</sup> During a January 1955 headquarters visit by African National Congress Youth League co-founder Dr. William Nkomo, Mason spoke with him about women in Africa. He recommended she reach out to Edith Nono Msezane, who could provide insight about the situation in Pretoria, where the national women's movement was picking up momentum. In this same period, as historian Nicholas Grant details, an organizer from the African Children's Feeding Scheme (ACFS) reached out to the Council for support of their program.<sup>176</sup> ACFS aimed to provide Black children in Johannesburg

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>175</sup> Correspondence from Mary McLeod Bethune to Minah Soga, September 26, 1945, Series 5 Box 18 Folder 300, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.; Correspondence from Madie Hall Xuma to National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Series 5, Box 18, Folder 300, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>176</sup> Nicolas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together*, 184-206.

at least one full meal per day. However, before they could formally commit, Mason first sought out approval from the State Department. Eventually gaining permission, the Council took up this project through fundraising, public forums with African students, exhibitions, musical performances, and distributing ACFS pamphlets.<sup>177</sup> Mason also utilized the Council's organizational structure to expand support by encouraging the national affiliate branch to increase their program participation.<sup>178</sup> As Grant shows, though they could not fundamentally subvert the system of apartheid, the Council's participation in supporting the ACFS had implications at home and abroad. In South Africa, the act of meeting the practical needs of Black South African children undermined the political system designed to under serve and exploit native Black communities. In the United States, their activities to raise support from general Council members provided an education in how Black South African's experiences under apartheid compared to Black Americans. Ultimately, continued this campaign and moved forward with other Africa related projects during Mason's last years as president.

Mason forwarded a multi-pronged approach to her Africa centered international agenda. As the IRD's 1954 exchange program proposal began to take shape in this period, she also attempted to establish Council chapter's abroad. In February 1955, Mason wrote to general members about the Council's collaboration with the State Department and Women's Bureau on an exchange program with which they had "every hope of seeing this present program greatly enlarged to include women from the countries of Africa and West Indies."<sup>179</sup> She invited general

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<sup>177</sup> Grant, 197.

<sup>178</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Director Board of National Affiliates, August 9, 1956, Series 4, Box 28, Folder 195608, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>179</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to NCNW Members, February 4, 1955, Series 4 Box 23 Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.



members to participate in the upcoming First National Conference on Exchange of Persons organized by the Institute of International Education. That same year she reached out to contacts in Ghana and Nigeria about her hopes for NCNW international chapters. Henry Fifie Mingle, a Ghanaian artist, responded to Mason's inquiry into this matter and promised to connect her with women's organizations, including the Federation of Gold Coast Women.<sup>180</sup> In June 1955, when Flora Azikiwe wrote expressing her sympathy for Bethune's passing and interest in becoming an official member of NCNW, Mason informed her that the Council was interested in establishing a chapter in Nigeria.<sup>181</sup>

By January 1956, the Council planned to participate in the second convening of the Exchange of Persons conference to "focus on the advantages and limitations that private organizations face in exchange of persons programs."<sup>182</sup> Projected for December 1956, the event intended to focus on emerging Africa and conference leadership invited them to participate in planning. As such, Mason reached out to Council women Helen Meade, Daisy Lampkin, and Marguerite Cartwright to attend the conference planning meetings. In her report back, Cartwright ensured her that NCNW was represented; however, there was a "slight de-emphasis" of Africa. Their participation in the conference planning demonstrated their continued efforts to establish an exchange program especially for African women, with which Mason hoped to accomplish by 1957.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Correspondence from Henry Fifie Mingle to Vivian Mason, May 12, 1955, Series 4 Box 23 Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>181</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Azikiwe June 21, 1955, Series 7 Box 1 Folder 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>182</sup> Proposed Plans For A Second National Conference on Exchange of Persons, January 26, 1956, Series 7 Box 13 Folder 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>183</sup> Correspondence from Marguerite Cartwright to Vivian Mason, March 26, 1956, Series 7 Box 13 Folder 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

In February 1956, Mason announced to Council women the organization's efforts to establish said program, in cooperation with the State Department, citing "the purpose is to exchange information to make it possible for African women to come to America to observe the work of women's organizations and for Council Women to go to Africa to see firsthand customs and conditions in the country to offer assistance in all possible ways to African women and children." With this language, the Executive Committee pitched the exchange program to their general members as an opportunity to explore African cultures and provide necessary assistance on the ground. African women leaders, on the other hand, would learn from organizational strength of U.S. women's groups.<sup>184</sup>

To this end, Mason intensified her outreach efforts by personally reaching out to women leaders in Africa. In June 1956, Mason invited Azikiwe to encourage Nigerian women to participate.<sup>185</sup> She stated, "It is our feeling that the Negro women from America should go to Africa to better understand each other and work together."<sup>186</sup> Mason believed that since many non-Black women were able to benefit from similar programs through the State Department, African women should also be able to take advantage, and NCNW would ensure their participation.

In June of 1956, Mason also corresponded with Liberian official Ellen Mills Scarborough, the Assistant Secretary of Public Instruction.<sup>187</sup> She expressed interest in re-

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<sup>184</sup> Press release, February 25, 1956, Series 7 Box 12 Folder 6, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>185</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Flora Azikiwe, March 1, 1956, Series 7 Box 1 Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Ellen Mills Scarborough, June 7, 1956, Series 7 Box 1 Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

establishing regular communication by resurrecting the local Council. Scarborough and the Council had a former relationship through Bethune, and the Liberian official was even present at NCNW's 11th Annual Convention.<sup>188</sup> Scarborough responded enthusiastically, looking forward to bringing the Women's College Club into affiliation. Mason forwarded instructions on how to begin this process, offered detailed programmatic guidelines. She also implored that Liberian women apply for the State Department exchange program as "a step that must be taken." She expressed that the Council was "very much concerned that not enough Negro women were being given the opportunity to visit and study in the United States" and encouraged her to share this opportunity with "all organizations." In addition to the guidelines and program suggestions, she offered additional support by dispatching the Council's 2nd Vice-President, Dr. Nancy Woolridge McGhee to "do whatever is possible to establish an International Council in Liberia."<sup>189</sup>

As one of the largest African American women's organizations in the United States, NCNW's plan to integrate international chapters represented an ambitious effort to unite Black women globally and elevate their collective concerns. Moreover, outside the channels of formal institutions such as the United Nations, the Council hoped that Black women globally would share in the responsibility of meeting their own particular needs by working collaboratively. This goal, even more significant, as it became increasingly apparent that the United Nations would not be a primary vehicle of significant political change for Black people. In June of 1956, Mason's efforts to bring African women leaders to the States materialized in Africa's first woman

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<sup>188</sup> Press Release, November 16, 1946, Series 5 Box 28 Folder 15, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>189</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to Ellen Mills Scarborough, June 7, 1956, Series 7 Box 1 Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

legislator's participation in the Council's joint program with the State Department's Foreign Leader Exchange Program.

### Mabel Dove

In the summer of 1956, the Gold Coast's first woman legislator, Mabel Dove, departed the West African British colony to begin a three month tour of the United States organized by NCNW. On July 20, 1956, the Council in cooperation with other local African American community organizations and businesses, honored the assemblywoman at a dinner party held at the stately Statler Hotel in Los Angeles. Seated next to Ruth Caston Mueller, regional director of NCNW and appointed host, Dove shared with the audience her optimism for the possibility of achieving racial democracy in the United States. She expressed, "I have learned many things in this wonderful country to carry home to my people...and I especially ask the Afro-American people in this country, not to ever forget their great African heritage."<sup>190</sup> Dove's message and presence affirmed the historical relationship between Africans and African Americans. Furthermore, her participation in this program, though fraught with some discord, marked an important moment in NCNW's strategy for engaging Black women in emerging countries, particularly on the African continent, by inaugurating their efforts to increase cross-cultural exchange. In conjunction with NCNW's endeavors, to the broader African American community, Dove's status helped signal a different understanding of African modernity. Dove visited the U.S. one year before Ghanaian independence and two years before Nkrumah's return in 1958. As such, she did not have the advantage of a celebrated defeat of colonialism and thus, entered a political landscape exploding with pressing domestic concerns. Despite this, her visit

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<sup>190</sup> "Sixty Toast Gold Coast Legislator," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 2, 1956, A5.

did not escape the national press and African American newspapers, which brought continued attention to the pace of national liberation efforts and also the role of African women in it.

The African women to whom Mason reached out largely represented the Council's counterparts on the continent. They were a part of a growing class of highly educated women, many of whom were committed to African self-governance and better opportunities for women. Some were active in international chapters of the YWCA and even founded their own social and civic organizations. As part of the colonial elite, they too traveled and participated in contemporary debates about Black freedom. As a feminist critic of the colonial government, Dove's collaboration with the Council offers measured insight into Ghanaian women nationalists' perspectives and experiences in this moment as they also grappled with the pace of decolonization and the place of Black women on the world stage.

Dove's family background, international education, and the shifting political climate over the twentieth century shaped her diaspora politics. Dove was born in Accra to Francis Dove, a prominent Sierra Leonean lawyer, and a Ghanaian businesswoman, Eva Buckman. Although she called the Gold Coast home, much of her formal education took place outside of the country. Dove attended school in Sierra Leone and, thereafter, her father sent her to London for finishing school. While in London, she enrolled herself in a secretarial course, against her father's wishes. As part of the cadre of western educated African students, Dove's return to Accra, participation in public life and the city's budding literary culture, helped define a "new womanhood."<sup>191</sup> That is, the concept that African women were modern and capable of taking on new roles in changing societies. Dove's professional and political career reflected the formation of this identity.

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<sup>191</sup> Jinny Kathleen Prais, "Imperial Travelers: The Formation of West African Urban Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in London and Accra, 1925-1935," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), pg. 182.

Her professional career and social status blossomed in the 1930s. In 1931, she began her career as a writer at *The Times of West Africa*, owned by J.B. Danquah, with whom she would marry two years later. In this role, she penned the majority of the papers' "Ladies Corner" columns as "Marjorie Mensah." Scholar Jinny Kathleen Prais describes the popular character as "a social reformer, interested in defending moral value, but at the same time lobbying for women's advancement in education, business, which she saw as essential to national and racial progress."<sup>192</sup> When Danquah's paper folded, Dove worked with Nnamdi Azikiwe at the *African Morning Post* under the pen "Dama Dumas" and also wrote for the *Nigerian Daily Times* as "Eburn Alakija."<sup>193</sup> Dove and Danquah eventually divorced in 1940. Nonetheless, her work in Accra's literary arena contributed to conversation about the role of African women in public life and in nationalist debate.

Significant political developments in the Gold Coast which made self-governance a stronger possibility helped push Dove from writing to direct action in politics. The colony's new constitution in 1946 gave Gold Coast local leadership a majority on the legislative Council, establishing the first political party- the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). J.B. Danquah participated as leadership and they collectively tapped Nkrumah to represent the party. In 1948, Nkrumah led a direct action against the colonial government ultimately leading to the arrest of the Big Six, which included both Danquah and himself. The following year, because of ideological differences, Nkrumah broke ties with the UGCC and established the Convention People's Party (CPP). The CPP became popular among the masses compared to the UGCC

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>193</sup> Stephanie Newell and Audrey Gadzekpo, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist: Mabel Dove* (Nottingham, U.K.: Trent Editions, 2004) xviii-xix.

comprised of conservative elites. Most notably, while both parties fought for their primary goal of self-determination, Nkrumah ultimately envisioned Pan-African unity in the form of a United States of Africa.

The CPP's strength lay in Nkrumah's willingness to tap into the organizational power of Ghanaian women. As an underserved, underutilized population, their massive numbers offered the CPP a strong advantage. CPP women participated in various roles including serving as propaganda secretaries and grassroots organizers, educating the general public about decolonization and improving women's conditions.<sup>194</sup> Dove joined this number when she became an official member of the CPP in 1950. More broadly, the strength of the Ghanaian women's movement materialized by 1951 when they won the right to vote. For Ghanaian women, including Dove, national independence and women's liberation were a project one in the same- re-organizing the colonial political and social structures that attempted to cement their marginalization.

Dove carried this energy with her on a 1951 trip to Sierra Leone where she helped her cousin, Constance Cummings-John, establish the Sierra Leone Women's Movement (SLWM) which organized the powerful group of local market women. According to LaRay Denzer, the main goals of the new women's movement were to "(1)improve the status of all Sierra Leonean women, whether born in the Colony or in the Protectorate; (2) to seek female representation on government bodies concerned with education, social welfare and the economy." The SLWM

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<sup>194</sup> Wilhelmina J. Donkoh, "Nkrumah and His 'Chicks': An Examination of Women and the Organizational Strategies of the CPP" in *Africa's Many Divides and Africa's Future: Pursuing Nkrumah's Vision of Pan-Africanism in an Era of Globalization*, eds. Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, Charles Quist-Adade, and Vincent Dadoo, (Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 106.

gained their first major campaign against price inflation for food, and went on to set up services including literacy classes, nurseries for working mother, and a scholarship fund.<sup>195</sup>

Utilizing her skills as a journalist, Dove began writing for the CPP affiliated newspaper, *Accra Evening News* in 1950. The following year, Nkrumah appointed her editor, though this was short lived, lasting only four months. Nonetheless, Dove continued to support the CPP agenda as a writer and recruiter for the women's wing, persistently elevating women's concerns, though not blindly. In this spirit, in a 1952 article, Dove critiqued the Ghanaian legislation for the lack of representation of women calling for a minimum of two women in the Council. She went on to declare

Gold Coast women have played a glorious part in this political struggle and it is time the men showed some appreciation. The sister of Pandit Nehru was once ambassador in America and there are now two women Cabinet rank in the Indian Assembly. The time is past when the male swaggers in front and the female with a baby on her back, a bundle on her head and another bundle on her arm, walks timidly behind her lord and master. If the men of Ghana want to gain the respect of the modern world, they must walk side by side with their women folk<sup>196</sup>

In 1954, Dove ran under the CPP ticket, against two male candidates, for a seat in the national legislative assembly in the Ga district. Danquah also campaigned in the same election, though under the UGCC ticket. The CPP won overwhelmingly, making Dove not only the first woman democratically elected legislator in the Gold Coast, but also the first on the continent. She became a popular representative well known for her concern for women's issues.

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<sup>195</sup> LaRay Denzer, "Women in Freetown Politics, 1914-61: A Preliminary Study," in *Sierra Leone, 1787-1987: Two Centuries of Intellectual Life*, Murray Last, Paul Richards, and Christopher Fyfe, eds., (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1987) 447-448.

<sup>196</sup> Mabel Dove, "Women in Politics," *Daily Graphics*, September 5, 1952 in *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist: Mabel Dove*, eds. Stephanie Newell and Audrey Gadzekpo (Nottingham, U.K.: Trent Editions, 2004), 112.



Dove's explicit reasons for wanting to participate in the State Department program are reflected in her political history as an outspoken advocate for women's rights and her larger challenge to the nation's legislative body for greater inclusion of women in national political affairs. These concerns mirrored women's activism sweeping the African continent and beyond. During a speech before the Ghanaian legislator, Dove announced "I am very anxious to do something for these women, especially my illiterate sisters and mothers, and I am planning a strong women's organization- it should be a stronghold for women."<sup>197</sup> Participating in the State Department program was likely an important step in advancing her mission to expand the growing women's movement in Ghana since it offered the opportunity to engage well established U.S. women's organizations with similar goals- education for women and children, increasing professional opportunities for women, economic welfare, etc. Dove's application to the program expressed an interest in seeing American women's organizations, "both political and non-political" and that the "inter-racial problems are of great concern."<sup>198</sup> On the issue of racial discrimination and violence, as a member of the press and the broader Pan-African community, Dove must have been fully aware of the developments in the United States. As such, she was not only interested in her own national affairs, but equally invested in the experiences of African American women and the ways they organized around their particular issues.

In early June 1956, The Governmental Affairs Institute contacted NCNW to coordinate an itinerary for Mabel Dove. Together, Mason and the Executive Director, Dorothy Guinn, curated a three month tour, from June to August, of 13 Black city centers, including Cleveland,

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<sup>197</sup> Albert Barnett, "You Read Reams About African Men But What About The African Women?" *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, March 16, 1957, pg. 10.

<sup>198</sup> Biographical Information on Miss Mabel Dove of Accra, n.d., Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, New Orleans, Atlanta, Birmingham, and Montgomery.<sup>199</sup> They elected NCNW hosts for cities where chapters were present, and recommended appropriate hosts for cities where there were none. The Council's prescribed tour aimed to provide a realistic and unfiltered foray into the experiences of millions of African Americans. For example, by the summer of 1956, Montgomery was over six months into the high profile Bus Boycotts, of which they designated Martin Luther King Jr. himself as a contact for Dove. More broadly, including the Southern leg of the tour while the region bubbled with racial tension meant that the Council did not intend to shy away from national issues. It is possible that Mason hoped that the exchange program would allow for the domestic situation to speak for itself, in a way that it could not through prior participation in programs such as the 1949 World Tour.

However, the State Department's control of the exchange program meant that the U.S. government ultimately shaped this experience as well. In late June, Mettger wrote back to Guinn with an entirely different itinerary for the Ghanaian legislator, rejecting their plans. According to historians Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, the State Department told Dove that she would be "'insulted and humiliated'" if she went to Montgomery.<sup>200</sup> Considering the ongoing U.S. propaganda campaign, it is more likely that they were concerned about how the situation in the region would impact the nation's image, rather than Dove's pride. In his letter to Guinn, Mettger stated that they made changes to "include more small places and a more relaxed atmosphere."<sup>201</sup> The final itinerary included locations such as Bloomington, Illinois, Connecticut,

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<sup>199</sup> Correspondence from Dorothy C. Guinn to Robert L. Kirkpatrick, June 11, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>200</sup> Bettye Collier and VP Franklin, *My Soul Is a Witness: A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era, 1954-1965* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999), 47.

<sup>201</sup> Correspondence from Phillip Mettger to Dorothy Guinn, June 25, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

Bozeman, Montana, and Seattle, Washington. In doing so the State Department preferred to show Dove a more idealized version of the U.S.

This course of action significantly impacted Dove's experience in the States. She arrived in Washington, D.C. in June 1956. Under the new itinerary, the State Department scheduled Dove to visit Nkrumah's alma mater, Lincoln University, and travel to New England before heading to the Midwest. Afterwards, she was scheduled to head further west to Montana and Oregon, and then California. They did include a limited tour of the South including Montgomery, Alabama, Atlanta, Georgia and Durham, North Carolina. In all, the State Department facilitated a tour that prioritized national interests by accommodating Dove's wishes.

Dove's presence in the States did not escape the attention of mainstream and African American press. Though given limited coverage, the press chronicled the tour's progress. The *Washington Post* celebrated the tour's launch with an article titled "She's In a Class by Herself" describing Dove as a "real pioneer on the African continent."<sup>202</sup> An article in the *Alabama Tribune* titled "Tell the Negroes To Join With Other Peoples of the World" covered Dove's stop in Norfolk, Virginia hosted by Vivian Mason and the local Council.<sup>203</sup> The event titled "Why Are the Eyes of the World on Africa?" was free and open to the public. Chapter president, Mrs. Margaret Barfield, said of the meeting, it was a "priceless opportunity for the citizens of this community to see and hear one of the most highly qualified women leaders in Africa today and to ask pertinent questions on conditions now existing in the Gold Coast."<sup>204</sup> The *New Journal*

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<sup>202</sup> Mary V.R. Thayer, "She's in a Class by Herself!" *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (1954-1959) May 27, 1956, pg. F5

<sup>203</sup> "Tell Negroes To Join With Other Peoples Of The World," *Alabama Tribune*, June 22, 1956, p.4.

<sup>204</sup> "African Political Leader To Speak Here Sunday," *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003), June 9, 1956, pg. B8

*and Guide* stated that Dove was “following with keen perception” the fallout of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decisions.<sup>205</sup> As such, she did not shrink from the issue of racial discrimination. There, Dove and Sierra Leone’s Carmela Renner highlighted the hypocrisy of the U.S. government’s role as a world leader and the continued practice of racial discrimination and segregation. Renner warned that because of these issues, a nation “whose house is not in order can’t go around and tell other people what to do.”<sup>206</sup> Dove expressed admiration for African Americans’ fight for full freedom and declared, “No one of the Negro race should go to sleep again on the struggle for full equality,” connecting the Civil Rights movement to liberation movements abroad.<sup>207</sup>

However, by early July, it is possible that Dove’s strong statements about the treatment of African American communities gained her the ire of the U.S. government. Media coverage revealed Dove and the State Department’s mutual frustrations. A July 21, 1956 article in the *Chicago Defender*, reported that the State Department “abruptly” canceled Dove’s trip and “whisked her out of the country” after July 4th, detailing that the Department considered the trip a “complete flop.” The article went on to describe her as “cynical and sullen and given to fits of depression, she proved too complex a personality for eager and willing hosts to cope with.”<sup>208</sup> Though the tour had not actually been canceled, further coverage revealed issues related to tour locations. A July 14, 1956 article also ran by the *Chicago Defender* reported that the State

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<sup>205</sup> “African Political Leader To Speak Here Sunday,” *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003), June 9, 1956, pg. B8

<sup>206</sup> Thomas Dabney, “African Women Urge Unity In Race Struggle,” *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003), June 16, 1956, pg. A5.

<sup>207</sup> “Tell Negroes To Join With Other Peoples Of The World,” *Alabama Tribune*, June 22, 1956, pg.4.

<sup>208</sup> “From The Diplomatic Pouch,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), July 21, 1956, pg.2.

Department “worried that Mabel Dove...was not reacting too well to her American tour” and “arranged for her to spend a week [in Bloomington, Illinois] to see a representative American town, which is free of racial tensions.”<sup>209</sup> Though Dove had a history as a headstrong individual, the way that she was described in the press could be a product of the State Department’s efforts to minimize the tour’s perceived failure. In this way, the issue was one of personal failure, rather than systemic racism. The role of the *Chicago Defender*, one of the most influential Black newspapers, in this messaging meant that within the broader Black community, any potential impact Dove’s presence in the States might have had would also be mitigated by her “difficult” nature.

Despite the established itinerary, it is clear Dove intended to see that her primary interests in women’s organizing and race relations were satisfied. Mettger wrote to NCNW’s appointed North Carolina representative mentioning Dove’s changes to the schedule which included canceling Durham and Atlanta. He noted that she intended to go to Montgomery.<sup>210</sup> The role of grassroots organizers such as Joanne Robinson of the Women’s Political Council and Rosa Parks’ as the face of the ongoing bus boycott highlighted African American women’s critical role as strategist, organizers, and advocates in the Civil Rights movement. After her visit, Dove wrote a letter and poem written to Martin Luther King Jr. congratulating “the warriors of Alabama Montgomery” for the “noble stand you have taken in the cause of freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from oppression, freedom from wrongs patiently borne throughout the centuries.”<sup>211</sup> The first stanza of her poem “Gold As Our Land” read,

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<sup>209</sup> “Rambling Round Up,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, July 14, 1956, pg.2.

<sup>210</sup> Correspondence from Phillip Mettger to Rencher Harris, July 18, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>211</sup> “To the Warriors of Alabama Montgomery,” July 27, 1956, Box 25, Folder 1, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Archive, Boston University, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston, MA.

It's wondrous strange  
That this our Race  
Which bore the brunt  
Of man's brutality to man  
Has come unscathed to be a light  
To generations yet unborn<sup>212</sup>

Dove expressed honor for the resilience and noble character in which she viewed the Black race in spite of the human tragedies experienced. Her poem echoed her comments in Norfolk, Virginia which emphasized that Black people in the U.S. should be proud of their achievements despite all they have suffered.<sup>213</sup> Her determination to go to Montgomery underscored that she stood in solidarity, framing the city's struggle for racial equality as part of the long fight for global Black liberation.

Dove maintained that Black people were connected by a broader struggle against white domination. Most importantly, she believed that these struggles must be fought alongside one another and rejected the idea that an improved status for Ghana alone could dismantle systems of oppression. In an article she penned in outrage about the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, she gave a call to action stating, "It is not enough that we in Ghana walk proudly with uplifted head, it is not enough that we sit at banquets and eat with the great of other lands; it is not enough that we are praised and flattered by the men and women of other races."<sup>214</sup> For Dove, western nations and Christian civilizations "have stood as a united force against Black peoples of

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<sup>212</sup> "Gold As Our Land," July 27, 1956, Box 25, Folder 1, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Archive, Boston University, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston, MA.

<sup>213</sup> Thomas Dabney, "African Women Urge Unity In Race Struggle," *New Journal and Guide (1916-2003)*, June 16, 1956, pg. A5.

<sup>214</sup> Mabel Dove, "Wanted: Positive Action Now!", March 26, 1960, *Evening News (Accra)* in *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist: Mabel Dove*, Stephanie Newell and Audrey Gadzekpo, (Nottingham, U.K.: Trent Editions, 2004) 115.

Africa...,” she believed “Africans must come together.”<sup>215</sup> Bridging these matters on the continent to global racism, she signaled a wider perspective in another article about South Africa, stating “The discrimination against the dark peoples of the world especially the Negro has continued far too long and it must be uprooted and entirely destroyed in this enlightened age.”<sup>216</sup> She pointed to the Soviet Union’s criminalization of racial discrimination as a model for the “supposed free world” to follow.<sup>217</sup> Many of the Black elites with which Dove interacted, including women of NCNW, viewed the United States as redeemable, and certainly did not and could not publically cite the Soviet Union as a model by this time. These ideas positioned her further politically left than her clubwomen counterparts across the Atlantic. As a Pan-Africanist, her commitment to democracy and the two-party state model distinguished her ideologically from Nkrumah. Nonetheless, her ability to highlight racial discrimination as a representative of a (Black) foreign government furthered the importance of building these relationships in the fight for civil rights.

Dove’s unwillingness, as a Black and African woman, to acquiesce to the Department’s facade of racial democracy is likely why they interpreted her pushback as “difficult.” Without her unpublished autobiography, there is little additional evidence of how she felt about the tour’s success or what she made of her experiences in the States. Considering Dove’s strong willed nature, the political stakes, and her expressed interest in women's organizations and race relations, it is likely that, if not for her own advocacy, she might not have achieved the experience for which she hoped.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Mabel Dove, “Racial Discrimination- A Crime: Commonwealth Must Act Now”, May 11, 1960, *Evening News (Accra)* in *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist: Mabel Dove*, Stephanie Newell and Audrey Gadzekpo, (Nottingham, U.K.: Trent Editions, 2004) 115.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

Another important possibility for Dove's presumed frustrations is that she became aware of the events developing in Ghana and its consequences for her fledgling political career. Nkrumah previously warned Dove not to participate in the U.S. tour because of the CPP's intensified push for national independence and the upcoming general election.<sup>218</sup> In May 1956, the British Parliament announced that if the CPP carried out peaceful general elections then the British colony would be granted full independence and could declare a date. Thus, when Dove stood before the legislature in mid-1956 to thank the Queen and proclaim her interest in starting a women's organization, she did so in response to the British parliament's acceptance of the CPP's proposal for Gold Coast independence. Dove left for the States in June of 1956, aware to some degree that the country was at the cusp of independence and her willingness to leave at such a critical time suggests how important it was to her, as the only woman legislator, to be able to include lessons from U.S. women in the construction of this new nation. While she was out of the country, the CPP organized a general election which took place in mid-July of 1956. In her place, the CPP nominated C.T. Nylander. The legislative process for independence unfolded quickly. LaRay Denzer posits that Dove's defeat was a result of her "political naivete" or the fact that candidates were required to submit their registration in person.<sup>219</sup>

Dove returned to Ghana in the late 1950s and there is little evidence to show that she started her own women's organization. By this period, Dove's relationship with Nkrumah and CPP soured and she eventually became a harsh critic of the government. Additionally, the two largest women's organizations, the National Federation of Ghana Women and the All African

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<sup>218</sup> Denzer, "A Study of Three Women," 222.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.



Women's League also battled encroachment by the CPP. Though no longer a politician, Dove remained active in public life and also returned to creative writing.

Overall, the Council's direct influence in shaping the tour proved to be an important element. The Los Angeles leg was one of the most successful tour stops for the sudden one-term legislator. There she toured television and music studios and learned about day-to-day life. She also attended events in her honor organized by the Council and other local African American organizations. Mettger reported back to the Council's executive leadership that Dove was "most excited about LA and the arrangements Mrs. Mueller had made for her there."<sup>220</sup> Mueller also wrote to Mettger about Dove's visit describing it positively as a "worthwhile and unique experience."<sup>221</sup>

### *Conclusion*

NCNW's Africa centered international agenda under Mason underscores the Council's expansive vision to bring Black women together to learn and collaborate about their collective concerns. Through various print mediums, Mason, along with the executive leadership and high profile members, attempted to make decolonization a relevant issue to Council members and the broader African American community prior to the success of independence movements on the continent. The culmination of the exchange program also highlighted the possibilities of the Council's vision. Both Dove and NCNW hoped for a tour where Black women's issues and organizational leadership were central. However, the State Department's influence over the tour and Dove's poor reception in certain locations, further aided by national developments in Ghana,

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<sup>220</sup> Correspondence from Phillip Mettger to Dorothy Guinn, July 25, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>221</sup> Correspondence from Ruth Caston Mueller to Phillip Mettger, July 26, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

significantly impacted the overall success of the program. These external factors demonstrated many limitations to this approach including dependency on formal institutions and how women's schemas for progress were marginalized in the nation building process. Though it is difficult to infer how the Council interpreted the success of this specific tour, they continued their efforts to work with African women through on-the-ground experiences which helped gain a better understand of Africa's many realities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Facing Problems in Common at the Height of African Liberation

In February of 1960, in Freetown, Sierra Leone, among a congregation of women representing four West African nations an elder Sierra Leonean woman stood to make a declaration after a long day of lively debate. She announced, “The men should be worried, but not about whether we are going to take over their shoes. We don’t want to take over their shoes. But we may take over their socks. It’s not going to be the same as it used to be.”<sup>222</sup> Indeed, the woman’s message captured much of the exuberance among African women leaders. After all, by the end of the year, 17 African nations claimed their independence and African women nationalists were actively preparing for new roles in these emerging societies. There to witness this historic moment and included in the count of women leaders at the February meeting was Dorothy Height, the fourth National President of the National Council of Negro Women. Height’s presence and active participation as both facilitator and discussant at this event exemplified the years of relationship building between NCNW and African women nationalists. For this collective group, the early independence era offered an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that their roles in emerging societies would not be “the same as it used to be.”

The timing could not have been better since growing interest in Africa also generated intrigue about African women’s experiences across the Atlantic. News articles from both white and Black publications in the United States reported on their rising leadership as well as their expectations for increased access to education for women and children.<sup>223</sup> Only a few months

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<sup>222</sup> Dorothy I. Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003)228; Correspondence from Dorothy Height to Council, March 10, 1960, NCNW Papers, Series 10, Box 21, Folder 412, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>223</sup> "African Women Assuming an Important Role in Nation," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, October 16, 1959, pg. 1.; Albert Barnett, "You Read Reams about African Men but what about the African

prior to Height's trip, an October 16, 1959 article by the *Atlanta Daily World* titled "African Women Assuming An Important Role in Nation" reported on an event hosted by the Council with distinguished guests Essie Smith and Florence Nylander of Ghana. As prominent clubwomen in their home country, the pair shared with the audience of Council women, greater Washington D.C. community members, and national organization leaders about the activities of Ghanaian women.<sup>224</sup> In conversation with their counterparts, the Council saw themselves actively contributing toward the "achievement of self-determination for all people and planned preparation for self-government" as laid out by their objectives for 1959 to 1960 Council year.<sup>225</sup>

In this light, the work the Council continued on Africa related issues requires that Dorothy Height's legacy be revisited. Known as "the Godmother of the Civil Right movement," Height has been recognized for her well documented domestic accomplishments. However, the overlap between African liberation and the Civil Rights movement also inevitably meant that her participation in the struggle for Black freedom included international dimensions. This aspect of her life has not been adequately examined. Height and the Council's grassroots experiences with

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Women?" *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, March 16, 1957, pg. 10.; Dilys Rowe, "African Women Earn Admiration," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, March 19, 1961, pg. F13; "Quaker Says African Women Play Key Role," *Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)*, March 22, 1958, pg. 7; "African Women Enjoy an Equal Role: Writer Finds they are Amazed at Attitudes Americans Hold Ghanaian Women Get Money without any Strings Attached," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, June 15, 1961, pg. 52.

<sup>224</sup> Both Essie Smith and Florence Nylander were among the women of Ghana's colonial elite pressing for independence and women's leadership. According to October 16, 1959 *Atlanta Daily World* article, Smith participated in the Girl Scout Association of Ghana, Accra Women's Association, and was president of the YWCA of Ghana. She also married prominent Pan-African activist J.E. Casely-Hayford's son, Archie Casely-Hayford. Florence Nylander led a career in social work and led the Accra Day Nursery Society, served as the Juvenile Court Magistrate, and also on the advisory board on Mass Education and Community Development. "African Women Assuming an Important Role in Nation," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, Oct 16, 1959, Accessed May 17, 2017, pg. 1.

<sup>225</sup> "Some Objectives for NCNW's International Relations Program 1959-1960," NCNW Papers, Series 10, Box 21, Folder 17, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

African women's organizations held the potential to make critical contributions to the Civil Rights Africa lobby. Among the core leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, by the time of the first American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa (ANLCA) was organized in 1962, Dorothy Height was the only member of the Big Six with extended grassroots experience in Africa.<sup>226</sup> Her focused work on women's issues at home and abroad underscore the critical perspective she brought to the fore. As such, when we consider the ways sexism maligned Height's leadership within the Big Six, her and the Council's potential contributions in this arena are among the possibilities and limitations of making Black women's issues a part of the broader Black freedom struggle during this period.

This chapter explores how Dorothy Height helped accelerate the Council's Africa centered international agenda in the early years of her administration. Where Vivian Mason developed strong "friendship ties" with women leaders across the continent, Height's administration facilitated and participated in cross-cultural (and political) exchange as a means of contributing toward the leadership development of African women and increasing African American women's capacity to engage US-Africa relations. Stateside, the Council collaborated with other U.S. women's organizations with similar interests as a means of increasing the number of African women leaders and students coming to the United States for fact-finding and leadership training. Among this group included important female political organizers in the African liberation struggle. Like Mabel Dove, many desired to understand the experiences of African Americans as well as converse with leaders across civil society. In emerging societies on the continent, Council women also sojourned for the purpose of cultural and political exchange.

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<sup>226</sup> I'm referring to the core leadership of the Civil Rights Movement as the mainstream organizational leads, otherwise known as the Big Six, including: Martin Luther King, Jr.(SCLC), A. Philip Randolph (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), Whitney Young (Urban League), James Farmer (CORE), Roy Wilkins (NAACP), and Dorothy Height (NCNW).

Their experiences on the ground ultimately shaped their efforts to influence US- Africa foreign policy. NCNW's role in building bridges between diaspora women made them an important, yet undervalued, member of the Civil Rights Africa lobby. Out of these cultural and political exchanges came dialogue about Black women's specific experiences, leadership, training needs, among other facets- providing an entry point into understanding the various ideological positions, social issues, cultural differences, and external pressures at play at the height of African liberation.

### *Dorothy Irene Height*

The daughter of a building contractor and nurse, Dorothy Height was born on March 24, 1912 in Richmond, Virginia to James Edward Height and Fannie Burroughs. When Height was born, her parents collectively had six children from previous marriages- Golden and Minnie from her father and William, Bennie, Jessie, and Josephine from her mother.<sup>227</sup> The Heights had one additional daughter together after Dorothy was born, Anthanette. In 1916, the family moved to Rankin, Pennsylvania, where her father found increased opportunity for contracting work and her mother, who once worked at the Black hospital in Richmond, became a private nurse. As such, she and her youngest sister were primarily raised by their older sisters, Josephine and Jessie, because of her mother's long hours. She grew up feeling close to all her siblings and thought of her the blended household as a "large, loving family."<sup>228</sup>

Height's earliest years were shaped by, among many factors, a multi-racial and multi-ethnic community, a deeply religious family, and the particular experiences of African Americans in the first half of the century. The family moved to Rankin as part of the Great

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<sup>227</sup> Height, 2.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

Migration of African Americans to the urban north with hopes of better economic opportunities, especially during World War I. Her parents chose Rankin in order to avoid the poor living and working conditions they heard about in major city centers. When they arrived they had no family, but eventually extended family members joined them. Just outside of Pittsburgh, Rankin typified the social, political, and economic transformations caused by industrial urbanization. The steel mill town, located in predominantly white Allegheny county, experienced an influx of European immigrants including Italians, Croatians, Slavs, among others after World War I. In 1910, Black residents made up just 3.4% of the county's population compared to 26.6% of foreign born whites.<sup>229</sup> Height remembered attending school with mainly first generation students, who spoke a foreign language at home.<sup>230</sup> Even though she thought positively of living with "people so different from one another" there were still economic tensions reinforced by a social hierarchy that placed native born whites at the top, followed by foreign born whites, and Black southerners at the bottom.

From an early age, Height's parents modeled the labor of community care and advocacy, soon conscripting her into the work. During World War I, she described her childhood home as "meeting grounds" where her parents received newly arrived Black southerners who accepted employment in the steel mills in exchange for a ride north, as arranged by railroad, steel and mining companies.<sup>231</sup> As a result, many workers came to her to get in contact with her father for additional work. Both parents were active in the local Baptist church. She spent a significant amount of her free time participating in church related activities, which included raising money

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<sup>229</sup> United States Census Bureau, 13<sup>th</sup> Census of the United States:1910, Statistics for Pennsylvania, <https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/41033935v35-41ch3.pdf>

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 4.

for Christian missionaries in Africa. However, it was arguably Height's mother whose participation in women's organizations ultimately left an indelible impact. As a member of the Pennsylvania Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Height remembered her mother taking her along to meetings at the local, state, and national levels, where she saw Black women "working, organizing, and teaching themselves."<sup>232</sup>

At 14 years old, she became the president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Girls Clubs. In addition, she participated in the Girl Reserves Club and YWCA youth program. She remembered fondly, Maude B. Coleman who was secretary of the Pennsylvania Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and a groundbreaking appointee in the State Welfare Bureau. When Coleman spoke to girls' Federation, Height was so moved by her words that she often returned the Coleman recited.<sup>233</sup> She had never saw or heard about a Black woman as an elected official prior to Coleman's election. It was significant example about the possibilities of Black women's leadership. The lessons she learned about community and cooperation from her parents' example, the activities of clubwomen, and her own activism, led her to understand that tackling societal ills were projects that were necessarily performed by the collective.

As a young adult, Height's early academic, professional, and political orientation were shaped by New York's Popular Front politics. Winning first-place in a speech competition, Height earned a four-year scholarship for college where attended New York University (NYU).

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<sup>232</sup> Height, 7.

<sup>233</sup> In her memoir, at 13 years old, Height remembered Coleman as the first Black women who was a member of the state legislature that she had heard of or seen (Height, 7). In 1938, Crystal Bird Fauset became the first Black women elected to the state legislature, winning a seat in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. So, it possible that excitement about Coleman's appointment might have been misremembered. News coverage at the time described Coleman's "rare" appointment as part of Governor Pinchot appreciation for Black voters, "Governor Gifford Pinchot Has Made Negro History in Pennsylvania: Breaks Down Color Barriers- Recognizes Ability and Efficiency- Has Three Rare Appointments of Negroes to His Credit," *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938)*, April 7, 1926, pg. 9.



In 1933, she graduated with a Bachelor's degree studying psychology and social work and a Master's degree in Educational Psychology. While attending NYU, she lived with her older sister Jessie Reynolds, her husband Flannigan who was a postal worker, and their three children in the famed Sugar Hill area in Harlem. The neighborhood was home to many members of the Black elite from the left to the mainstream including Adam Clayton Powell, Lousie Thompson and William Patterson, Eunice Hunton Carter, and was also a special incubator for Black radicals.<sup>234</sup> As a student, she co-organized a club that hosted luminaries including W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Paul Robeson. As such, Harlem exposed her to a spirited community of Black leaders. During the Great Depression, she found work to tide her over as a proofreader for Marcus Garvey's newspaper *The Negro World*. Living in Harlem was an important time in Height's political development.

She described this as a time in her life when we began to sort out her own politics. Within the broader community, her work with the Harlem Christian Youth Council brought her into conversation with 88 youth groups. Height recalled learning a lot from young Communists, citing their many debates about what a democratic society could look like, navigating meetings, and direct action- though she knew she was not a Communist.<sup>235</sup> She participated Adam Clayton Powell's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" protests. She never felt disconnected from the local community, as students and residents were part of the same movements.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Radical Blackness and Mutual Comradeship at 409 Edgecombe," *Black Perspectives*, African American Intellectual Historical Society, <https://www.aaihs.org/radical-Blackness-and-mutual-comradeship-at-409-edgecombe/>.

<sup>235</sup> Dorothy Height, Interview with Polly Cowan, February 11, 1974, Black Women Oral History Project, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women, Harvard University, 20 <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:10043348>.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 15.

Height pursued a professional career as a social worker at the peak of the Great Depression. She first worked as an assistant in the Brownsville Community Center servicing one of Brooklyn's most high needs community. It was this experience helping Brownsville's mostly Black and Jewish residents that solidified her vested interest in public service. She transitioned into Brooklyn Bureau of Charities and later the Home Relief Bureau (a part of the New York City Welfare Administration) where dealing with conflict and listening to the needs of people were vital skills she developed in this role. By the late 1930's, Height accepted a position as the Director of Training at the Harlem branch of the YWCA where, among many accomplishments, she helped advocate for unionizing and city regulation of what was commonly understood as New York's domestic worker slave market. In these various roles, Height learned to navigate policy, tough conversations, and maneuver new environments with the interest of the community in mind.

Though local issues shaped much of her early career, in 1937, Height entered the international arena leaving welfare administration in order to further engage faith based work. Like many clubwomen of the time, her devotion to the Christian faith not only guided her worldview, but her commitment to social welfare. As an active member of a number of Christian youth organizations, Height was selected as one of ten U.S. representatives at the World Conference on Life and Work of the Churches meeting held in England. The event brought together clergy, theologians, officials, and scholars from around the world. She later attended the World Conference of Christian Youth held in Amsterdam in 1939. While in London, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays of Howard University included Height among a select group of attendees to visit Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie during his exile. Though she remembered the occasion for its lessons on decorum, it must have also been a special opportunity to learn about the

anticolonial struggle in the context of the Second Italo-Ethiopia War. It is likely that this was her first interaction with an African political leader and her recollections of this moment say little about how it might have influenced, if at all, how she thought about Africa or her relationship to the continent. However, in the wake of the Scottsboro Boys trial, her response to questions about her status as a Black person in the United States while abroad reveal that despite the hypocrisy between democracy and discrimination, Height held tightly to her American identity. Height's relationship to the States and what it meant to be a U.S. citizen remained a point of conversation in her international experiences. She explained "...I have to talk about what is unjust, but I also feel this is my country. I've done this even when I've been in Africa...It is that way wherever it is that I find myself sorting out what is decent about it, but also what is unjust about it."<sup>237</sup> In contrast to Mary McLeod Bethune's vocal and explicit claims to Africa, Height held this position for much of her adult life. For Height, these early experiences organizing internationally ingrained what she described as the "value of having higher goals that transcend the pettiness that we so often encounter in daily life." Identifying a collective goal in order to work across difference became a strategic stance that would later shape NCNW's work with African women's organizations by mid-century under her leadership.<sup>238</sup>

Just after her return to the States, Height joined the fold of Council women in the fall of 1937. Though still a nascent organization, Bethune and other Council women met at the Harlem branch of the YWCA expecting a visit from former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. As the Assistant Director at the branch, Height escorted the First Lady to the meeting. It is at this fall meeting where Height met Bethune, who persuaded her to join NCNW and immediately

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<sup>237</sup> Dorothy Height interview with Polly Cowan, 44.

<sup>238</sup> Height, 77.

assigned her to the resolutions committee after just a brief conversation. Thereafter, Height became immersed in Council work, later serving as Registrar for the National Conventions as well as Chair of the Personnel Committee. Between 1938 and 1939, despite the fact that Height lived in New York, Bethune recruited her to attend meetings in Washington, D.C. on her behalf. Bethune personally requested for the YWCA to release Height of the duties in order for her to work full-time for the Council and eventually appointed Height as the Executive Secretary. She credited Bethune's mentorship with helping her to identify her talents and focus on big picture issues.<sup>239</sup> Bethune's mentorship ushered her not only into the inner workings of this particular organization but into the fold of Black women's organizational struggles toward justice full-time.<sup>240</sup> In 1957, after working for the Council in various capacities for twenty years, the national body elected Height as the fourth National President.

#### *Women's Africa Committee*

By the time Height took office, interest in African political affairs proliferated among mainstream U.S. organizations. NCNW distinguished itself with its extensive experience building relationships with African women under previous presidents. For example, on October 19, 1956 as part of Vivian Mason's campaign to increase NCNW's engagement with African women, she wrote a letter to the African-American Institute (AAI) requesting assistance. Created in 1953, and funded by the USIA as a non-profit, the African-American Institute aimed to build stronger relationships between the people of the United States and Africa. Included among its executive committee members were Black leaders such as entertainer Etta Moten Barnett,

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<sup>239</sup> Height, 156.

<sup>240</sup> Prior to her role as National President of NCNW, Height served as the National President of the historically Black public service sorority Delta Sigma Theta from 1947 to 1956.

Ambassador Edward Dudley, Historian William Leo Hansberry, and Lincoln University President Horace Mann Bond. In her appeal, Mason cited the Council's recent work with Mabel Dove of Ghana, Carmela Renner of Sierra Leone, as well as the Vice-President's trip to Liberia. She expressed that their objective, at the time, was to get in touch with leaders from women's organizations and learn more about women's organizations in Africa and their programs.<sup>241</sup> Within three years, Council women were not only affiliated with the African- American Institute under the Women's Africa Committee, but also an active part of the Committee's creation and early programming.

The Women's Africa Committee (WAC) functioned as a clearinghouse for mainstream U.S. women's organizations interested specifically in programming related to African women. This increased interest among U.S. governmental representatives, establishment of Women's Activities Advisor within the USIA, and the State Department's investment in cultural propaganda wars all contributed to WAC's formation. John W. Hanes, an official of the State Department, consulted with women leaders, among which included former Council national president, Dorothy Ferebee. Thereafter a small contingent of women, limited to those who completed work with the State Department, came together and established themselves as a non-governmental organization under the title of Africa Program Committee. In order to resolve its legal status, they agreed to affiliate with an existing organization with similar objectives. WAC became a special division of AAI, renaming the group the Women's Africa Committee, and offering a formal announcement in a July 6, 1959 press release.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to African American Institute, October 19, 1956, NCNW Papers, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>242</sup> "Background on Women's Africa Committee," July 8, 1959, Box 1, Folder 1, African- American Institute, Women's Africa Committee Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.; "Minutes of Africa Program Committee," 1958, Box 1, Folder 1, WAC Records, African- American

A number of Council women participated in the Committee. At one of the early organizing meetings, the group voted Dorothy Ferebee as a board member and Vice-President. Ferebee's commitment to the organization even helped her secure their first sponsored travel grant to Africa, sending her on a 5 week tour of Ghana, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) in the summer of 1960.<sup>243</sup> Along with Ferebee, Dorothy Height and Jeanne Noble also participated in various capacities including serving on the executive committee, during WAC's earliest years. Dorothy Height primarily served as an advisor. Jeanne Noble, Councilwoman and National President of the affiliated public service sorority Delta Sigma Theta, also served as a secretary.<sup>244</sup> Noble's participation in WAC overlapped with the programmatic agendas of the Council and her own organization. Though by 1959 each of them had limited (or non-existent) on the ground experience on the continent, their participation in WAC further advanced the Council's objective for African women to visit the U.S. in "considerable numbers" on a much

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Institute, Women's Africa Committee Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>243</sup> "Report to the Annual Meeting Women's Africa Committee," May 23, 1960, Box 1, Folder 1, African-American Institute, Women's Africa Committee Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>244</sup> Noble is also listed as part of NCNW's leadership core in a 1959 memo (List of Leaders to Serve as Leadership Core, November 3, 1959, Series 4, Box 28, Folder 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.). Additionally, Delta Sigma Theta is an organizational affiliate of NCNW. Noble, an educator from Albany, Georgia, stimulated Delta Sigma Theta's international programming with a special interest in Africa in this same period. Under her leadership, the sorority founded a chapter in Liberia and also funded a maternity wing at a hospital in Nairobi, Kenya. Noble traveled to Ghana in 1960 to attend the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent to represent the sorority. See Gloria Harper Dickinson, "Pledged to Remember: Africa in the Life and Lore of Black Greek-Letter Organizations" in *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision*, eds. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) 27; Paula Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* (New York: Amistad, 2006).

larger scale.<sup>245</sup>

WAC saw itself as an institutional sponsor of African women's "modernization" in the midst of rapidly shifting political and social moment. They aimed to "foster and enrich intercultural relations between African and American women" and "to promote the social, educational, and economic advancement of African women."<sup>246</sup> Their six main program objectives were to: Bring African women leaders to the US for training, immerse African women in the US and US women in Africa into their respective communities, initiate program for African visitors, serve as a clearinghouse for American women's organizations with African interests, develop partnership projects, and to convene conferences. They also created publications including "Dos and Dont's for Conducting Programs in Africa" and a report based on the conference "The Role of Women in Africa." The cornerstone of their activities, however, centered on providing tangible support of various kinds to African women, including professionals, beauty queens, legislators, and especially students. According to WAC, out of the 1,700 African students studying in the United States, 65 were women.<sup>247</sup> They determined to offer tangible support to the small cadre of female students through scholarships and fundraising, locating suitable hosts, and connecting them with a wider network of U.S. women leaders. By training in the United States, the women of WAC hoped that African women leaders from emerging nations would develop similar community programs in their home countries.

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<sup>245</sup> Correspondence from Vivian Mason to African-American Institute, Oct. 19, 1956, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>246</sup> "Rules of Procedure for the Women's Africa Committee of the African-American Institute," n.d., Box 1, Folder 1, African- American Institute, Women's Africa Committee Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>247</sup> "Women's Africa Committee, Minutes of Joint Meeting Committee Members and Advisors," November 20, 1959, Series 10, Box 36, Folder 16, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

Additionally, they also supported U.S. women visits to Africa, by facilitating fundraising, identifying USIA Cultural Affairs Officers as liaisons to ease their transitions into their new communities.<sup>248</sup>

By partnering with the Committee, NCNW advanced their own organizational agenda by serving as emissaries for African women leaders. One such leader was Lucy Lameck, a 27-year-old Tanganyika National Union (TANU) organizer. The leading nationalist party, TANU ushered the East African British colony to independence in 1961, becoming the nation of Tanzania under the leadership of Pan-Africanist and first president Julius Nyerere. Lameck grew up in a politically active farming family and became involved in politics in 1955. In TANU, she served as a district organizer, executive member of the Northern Province, and directed the women's wing. Under the sponsorship of Delta Sigma Theta, with Jeanne Noble at the helm, Lameck visited the U.S. in 1959. Lameck completed one-semester of study at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo to study political science and sociology. She extended her stay for an additional two months to travel across the country to study women's organizations and labor organizing. Her politics and popularity as a dynamic leader garnered her the nickname by the U.S. press as "the female Tom Mboya of East Africa."<sup>249</sup> Lameck hoped that "since Tanganyika is a vast country, economically poor with a dearth of leaders due to a lack of education, I felt I

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<sup>248</sup> "Report to the Annual Meeting Women's Africa Committee," May 23, 1960, Box 1, Folder 1, African-American Institute, Women's Africa Committee Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>249</sup> Tom Mboya was a Kenyan Pan-African educator, trade unionist, and independence leader. The comparisons between the pair could refer to the fact that both Mboya and Lameck attended Ruskin College in England and served as labor organizers. Mboya was also known for his personality and oratory skills.



could make a contribution in the country in general and for the women in particular.”<sup>250</sup> With a special interest in labor, Lameck hoped her time in the States could explain “why and how America is so rich and Africa is so poor.”<sup>251</sup> For Lameck, this experience abroad would strengthen her ability to bring Tanganyikan women into politics with a sharp critique of the social, political, and economic order.

Lameck successfully carried out her mission with support from WAC, NCNW, and Delta. She visited 15 major cities and connected with women’s groups and labor unions. WAC invited Lameck to be the keynote speaker at their first conference held in November 1959, “The Role of Women in Africa,” however, she fell ill and could not fulfill this duty. The Committee supported her when she requested financial and networking assistance for the duration of her stay in the U.S. They agreed to “give insight into the labor movement and citizen participation in labor activities...give her an opportunity to interview specialists in the field of political education for women...[and] allow her to observe and interview members of a State political committee.”<sup>252</sup> Later in November, she spoke at NCNW’s International Night in Chicago as the keynote. The special gathering brought together prominent Council women including Height, Ferebee, Noble, and Elsie Austin. Her message to the audience of clubwomen highlighted the impact of colonial exploitation on Tanganyika’s people. She made additional visits with chapters of DST and NCNW while also visiting with the AFL-CIO, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and

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<sup>250</sup> "Profile: Young Leader Sees Key Role for Women" (Interview with Lucy Lameck of Tanganyika)," *Africa Special Report* 4, (1959): 3.  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1304059982?accountid=14512>. Accessed October 6, 2019.

<sup>251</sup> “Says Tanganyika Race Relations Outstrip U.S.,” February 4, 1960, *Jet* 17: 3, 4.

<sup>252</sup> “Women’s Africa Committee, Minutes of Joint Meeting Committee Members and Advisors,” November 20, 1959, Series 10, Box 36, Folder 16, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

women's political groups.<sup>253</sup> She received an overall warm reception in the press. Reporters inquired about comparisons to African American women, cultural differences, and her thoughts on the United States- to which she commented on the slow pace of race relations in the United States.<sup>254</sup> Lameck left the U.S. in late February 1960 in anticipation of the country's independence. She accepted a ministerial appointment by Nyerere in the Tanganyika National Assembly. In 1965, she won an elected seat in the National Assembly becoming one of the first women to serve in parliament. Her time abroad contributed to her development as a political leader at home.

While leaders such as Lameck had positive experiences, WAC, as an organization, received mixed outcomes and reception. On one hand, African women from emerging nations could incorporate international experiences into the nation building process. For sponsoring groups like NCNW and Delta, the opportunity to collaborate on this end offered "a deeper understanding of problems facing Africa today" in order to "aid the public service sorority in future decisions relative to further implement its international project."<sup>255</sup> That is to say, for these clubs facilitating and participating in these cross-cultural exchanges provided a better lens from which to organize Africa related programming. However, this dynamic was not without

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<sup>253</sup> "Chicagoans Greet African Woman Leader during Four-Day Tour: Lucy Lameck Studies Women Groups in City," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jan 30, 1960, 13, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/493062015?accountid=14512>, Accessed October 6, 2019; "Lucky Lameck to Speak at Association Meeting." *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, Feb 16, 1960, 14, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/493767513?accountid=14512>, Accessed October 6, 2019. "African's Lucy Lameck to Arrive at Air Port Saturday." *Los Angeles Sentinel (1934-2005)*, Feb 04, 1960, B3, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/564581029?accountid=14512>, Accessed October 6, 2019.

<sup>254</sup> "Says Tanganyika Race Relations Outstrip U.S.," February 4, 1960, *Jet* 17: 3, 4.

<sup>255</sup> "Deltas Sponsor Female Tom Mboya of Tanganyikan on Study Trip." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Oct 24, 1959. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/492934546?accountid=14512>, Accessed October 6, 2019.

challenges and critiques. In a report on WAC's first year, some feedback they received from participants stressed that there should have been more conversations with American women past 'how-to-do-it.' Consultants also highlighted that participants did not get the opportunity to meet with working class African American women. Additionally, increased violence by white minorities in Southern Africa exposed real limitations of aligning with liberal philanthropic organizations, as well as the State Department. In the wake of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, an open letter to AAI's Black board, by journalist Chuck Stone, challenged the group's weak comments on the matter citing its position as a "non-political" organization and also labeled the group as "missionary oriented."<sup>256</sup> WAC records also note criticism from Crystal Bird Fauset, African American state legislator and founder of Africa House.

WAC folded in 1978 and by the latter 60's Council women's participation dwindled, possibly due their commitments to a number of organizations. Nonetheless, working with WAC provided NCNW with an opportunity to expand its goal of increasing engagement among African American and African women- especially because the Council did not have the financial means to carry this work out exclusively. As a mainstream women's organization, the Council's participation in this sphere provided an important buffer within the formal channels within which many African women leaders would come to the U.S. to participate in exchange programs.

### *Height's West Africa Tour*

In early 1960, The Committee of Correspondence (CofC) commissioned Height to study the training needs and leadership interests among African women's organizations. The CofC was

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<sup>256</sup> Chuck Stone, "African-American's White Uncle Toms," January 30, 1960, Box 1, Folder 2, African-American Institute, Women's Africa Committee Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

established in response to the work of the WIDF to counter Soviet propaganda targeting women by affirming U.S. democracy.<sup>257</sup> Like other women's volunteer organizations, the CofC designated itself as a private non-governmental organization. Members included Council woman Edith Sampson and Eunice Hunton Carter, along with participating members of WAC such as Julie d'Estournelles and Anna Lord Strauss. It is among a number of organizations exposed for receiving funding from the CIA. Whether Height was aware of the CofC's relationship to the CIA, as Helen Laville explains, many of the women who participated in these programs were already committed to the ideological project.<sup>258</sup> Moving across radically different political contexts in a short span of time, Height's observations and the conversations she participated in during her tour of West Africa offers invaluable insight into the activities of women's transnational organizing on the continent.

Additionally, in this period, a number of Council's executive leadership and notable members increasingly made their first trips to Africa. For general members, the organization facilitated similar opportunities for those with the means to participate, such as NCNW's 1960 "Vacation with a Purpose." First initiated in 1959, the European tour included an optional leg to Ghana and Nigeria for the first time. As for Height, she first traveled to West Africa in 1955 when she visited Liberia with the YWCA under a similar assignment related to facilitating training programs. Her extended trip sponsored by the Committee of Correspondence in 1960 came at the peak of Africa's independence movement. This six-week tour included Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, and Guinea, where she joined conversations about the rising tide of women's movements grappling not only with the position of African women in emerging

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<sup>257</sup> Helen Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of American Women's Organisations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) 171.

<sup>258</sup>Ibid, 189-191.

societies, but also attempting to reconcile their experiences across borders.

In late February, Height arrived in Freetown, Sierra Leone in time to attend a meeting of West African women's organizations. She described this assembly as a "historic event," bringing together for the first time women from varying cross sections of society in Sierra Leone and throughout West Africa, including Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria.<sup>259</sup> Though Sierra Leone and Nigeria had not yet gained full independence, the meeting signaled that they were preparing for new societal roles and responsibilities. The women's overall goal was to establish a continuing relationship among the group. The Sierra Leone Federation of Women's Organizations, led by Madame Ella Koblo Gulamo, orchestrated the four-day convening. Presiding over the event, Gulamo served as the president of the Sierra Leone women's group, the first woman Paramount Chief, and a member of the House of Representatives. Height and Gulamo had an established relationship since, according to Height, the two had previously met when Gulamo visited the States some years prior.<sup>260</sup> Considering that these women's groups were relatively new, inviting Height to the meeting indicated the value Gulamo and some other women leaders placed on Height's training expertise and NCNW as a well-established women's organization.

The sessions known as "talks" covered a number of subjects including women's experiences in their respective countries, politics of sustaining women's organizations, affiliating with international groups, and increasing access to education for girls. Height wrote, "It was an unusual thing for this cross section of women to spend a whole day at the beach simply telling one another how life was in their several countries and also unburdening themselves on what

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<sup>259</sup> "Letter to Council Women," March 10, 1960, Series 10, Box 21, Folder 412, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

they felt was the job that needed to be done.”<sup>261</sup> The women were especially interested in the prospect of international affiliations. As the lead for this discussion, participants asked Height about what platforms NCNW, as an organization on the international scene, have found most effective in the struggle for world peace.<sup>262</sup> She found that while some were committed to internationalism and furthering their networks, others were less convinced about the need. On this matter, in later sessions, some delegates expressed reservations about the necessity of African leaders traveling abroad for professional development. Though they did not want these opportunities to end, they hoped more could be done at home. In the evening, the event opened to the public and the general audience’s interests mirrored much of the earlier dialogue. Community members inquired about the experiences of U.S. women to which Height shared about American families. When she showed the Council film, “Women, Unite,” she recalled the ovation from the crowd when Bethune appeared on the screen, writing, “the Liberian women who had known her and others who had visited our country, the Council was referred to as an example of what their sisters in America are doing.”<sup>263</sup> These dialogues underscored the fact that fostering international relationships was not a given, but consciously developed through discourse.

In subsequent sessions, the delegates shared the successes and challenges of their work. Nigerian women leaders described their experiences organizing market women. Ghanaian women offered their experiences in trade and sharp business acumen. On challenges, the groups (including Height) commented on the shared experience related to the difficulties of encouraging

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

middle class women and those in positions of power to participate in training, as opposed to the eagerness with which women in rural areas and market women showed for such opportunities. They also compared what they were seeing in Sierra Leone to other West African nations. In Sierra Leone, though the Creole ethnic group dominated much of national politics, women's groups exercised a more representative structure such that women from various cross sections of society could come to a consensus. Their conversations around their respective (and collective) challenges reveal a conscious effort to work across class and ethnic differences.

Within Freetown, the meeting garnered attention. When the elder Sierra Leonean woman stood to affirm their schema for African freedom by declaring "...we may take over [men's] socks. It's not going to be the same as it used to be," the message made it across the city.<sup>264</sup> Height explained that everywhere the group of women went "in all parts of the city, in the government offices and other places, men would say, 'so the women are going to take over our socks!'" To some degree, the running joke implied that women's organizing was viewed as a non-threatening matter. However, their sense of urgency for increased participation in public life within emerging societies was palpable. At the end of their meeting another woman asserted, 'we want the men to know that we will push them aside and move ahead if they don't move fast enough.' They needed resources to keep up with the pace of political developments. To these ends, this group of West African women leaned on one another as well as established Black women's organizations, such as NCNW, for programmatic inspiration and administrative efficiency. At her departure the women asked Height to send "the message back to the United States of America that their African sisters want to waste no time in moving ahead toward a

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid; Height, 228.

better life for themselves and their children.”<sup>265</sup>

The meeting closed with shared appreciation among the delegates for Height’s participation and leadership. They asked for her feedback and presented her with cloth similar to Ellen Gulamo’s attire, not only symbolizing her level of importance and authority, but inducting her into the fold. Formalizing her inclusion, the delegates appointed her the “Associate in International Relations.” They tasked her with “a very special assignment to make contacts to help build bridges between women in Sierra Leone and key women in other West African countries whom [she] would meet as well as with women back in the United States”<sup>266</sup> The group decided to meet at least once every two years and also proposed disseminating the “talks” via radio broadcasts. The first meeting of West African women’s organizations highlighted that African women were not only invested in getting down to the specifics of what decolonization would look like for themselves, but interested in developing this agenda in dialogue with the diaspora.

Height left Sierra Leone and traveled further north to neighboring Guinea. She arrived in Conakry describing the climate as “the most historic moment since 1947, except for independence.” Undoubtedly, when Height reached this destination, Guinea was in the midst of a radical transformation under the leadership of President Sékou Touré. With support from Nkrumah, Touré stabilized Guinea’s economy after France left the nation in dire financial strains in exchange for independence in 1958. On the day she arrived, Touré suspended all other forms of currency and launched the Guinea Franc to bolster economic independence. Though Touré’s brand of African socialism was ardently anti-western and he was a part of the Non-Aligned

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<sup>265</sup> “Letter to Council Women,” March 10, 1960, Series 10, Box 21, Folder 412, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.



Movement, he accepted support from the Soviet Union. Considering her role as a representative of the CofC, Height's report on Guinea primarily focused on what appeared to her to be encroaching Soviet influence. Nonetheless, the picture of women's activism in West Africa she offers illustrates the divergent climates they traversed in order to forward their own agenda.

Height witnessed Conakry's observation of the 50th Anniversary of [International] Women's Day. Women and girls of various ages from across the country gathered at the headquarters of the national party, the Democratic Party of Guinea. Together, 43 women's groups and the general public filled the hall to capacity. Height estimated almost 2,000 attendees indoors and a massive crowd of 9,000 people outside. The Women's International Democratic Federation organized the event and was led by General Madame C. Lofó. The event coordinators invited Height to take a seat of honor on the platform where she joined First Lady Hadja Andrée Touré, local leaders, the wives of ministers of Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, and women from East Germany. Speeches, performances, and messages from other lands encompassed the program for the occasion. Thereafter, the congregation of about 10,000 women marched across the city ending at the President's home. Height noted, "In their faces one could see women with a new sense of importance and power."<sup>267</sup>

In Conakry, Height spent her time in sessions with Madame Lofó and First Lady Touré over three days. She learned that under President Touré, the country had one political party and one recognized women's organization. Lofó explained the state of women's organizing, noting their significant role in the election of Sékou Touré. According to Height, Lofó also emphasized that Guinean women were interested in helping other African women in their struggle for

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<sup>267</sup> "Letter No. 2 from Miss Dorothy Height," March 10, 1960, Box 17, Folder 6, Committee of Correspondence Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

independence.<sup>268</sup> Lofó's pledge of solidarity reflected the broader political climate. Height discussed a general feeling of being welcome in both Sierra Leone and Guinea, commenting that "We all have a sense that if one must be an American in Guine[a] these days it is all to the good to be a Black American."<sup>269</sup> However, the terms of this kinship were still in flux. She reported that one question frequently asked to representatives of the International Cooperation Administration from local community members was that

...people here want to know how sincere the American Negro is in the African today. Whether the thirst of interest is a fad and a kind of thing to do or whether the American Negro really sees himself willing to make some of the sacrifices that will be involved if the new Africa is to receive the many different kinds of support that it seeks as it moves toward a new future<sup>270</sup>

Height did not attempt to take a position on the question but instead left it for Council women to consider. The question underscored that in the context of increasing Black professionals arriving in emerging African nations, citizens imagined African Americans as part of the nation building process on the continent and that many bought into the idea of Africa's elevated position on the world stage for the benefit of the diaspora. For Guineans, working through the terms of solidarity meant that building this 'new Africa' required commitment that extended beyond the flurry of the political moment.

In Liberia, her third tour stop, Height observed a more familiar state of women's political activism. The country's over 100-year history of independence, though complicated, distinguished it from West Africa's emerging nations at the time. Moreover, Liberia's tangled

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> "Letter to Council Women," March 10, 1960, Series 10, Box 21, Folder 412, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

history with the United States preserved historical and political linkages with African American communities. As such Liberia hosted the first Africa based international chapters of many Black clubs and other U.S. volunteer organizations. Longtime Council friend, Ellen Scarborough and the women of the Liberian Federation served as principle guides for the duration of Height's stay. She first visited the Fundamental Education Center in the Klay region where she joined a group of women who were in leadership training to take their skills back to their towns. In this setting, the trainees learned about domesticity and midwifery. She also visited the YWCA chapter in Firestone area where Scarborough and Height held a dialogue with the young women in attendance. Commenting on the increased role of women in advancing civil society she remarked, "More and more women who are prepared to do so are giving leadership in the country's program to raise the level of literacy and social education across the land."<sup>271</sup>

Later, Height joined a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Federation. Among a number of matters the women discussed problems with the umbrella structure of women's organizations and how they might put into action the recommendations from the meeting in Sierra Leone. A luncheon organized by Ellen Scarborough which brought together leaders from across the country followed the executive committee's meeting. There the women clarified the purpose and methods of a coordinating body, changed the name of the organization to reflect the kind of group they wanted to build, and installed new elected officers. The full session of Liberian women leaders brought together key women from the colleges, government, as well as women representing each ethnic group. Height noted that the group worked in three languages and had participation across ethnic, class, and educational backgrounds. She wrote, "It was a rich

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<sup>271</sup> "Letter from Dorothy Height re/Liberia," March 23, 1960, Box 17, Folder 6, Committee of Correspondence Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

experience in witnessing how people in different states face problems in common.

Communication is difficult but essential to progress which reaches the masses.” In Liberia, as in Sierra Leone, women’s organizations attempted to create alternatives to the male-dominated social hierarchies which shaped civil society. Their project was diasporic in nature as signaled by their gift of local cloth to Height at the end of the gathering, with the message, “This will make you not forget that you are not complete without us.”<sup>272</sup>

In Ghana, Height observed a different kind of unification. As in Guinea, the Ghanaian government consolidated various women’s groups into one main organization and housed it under the Department of Social Welfare. Over 100 women’s groups were organized into the department setting clear boundaries for women’s sphere of influence. Their program focused on self-help, family life, food, and literacy. After gaining independence three years prior, Ghana formally became a republic in 1960 and Nkrumah’s administration tightened its political control by slowly collapsing parts of civil society under government influence.

Nonetheless, women from far reaching segments of the country were anxious for new skills and relationship building. Height reported that women traveled as far as two days with small children to join sessions in Accra. She traveled outside of Accra to Kumasi and Tema. In Kumasi, she observed over 100 women learning about food preservation and volunteerism. Even though “there [were] major problems facing the organization of women,” Height felt encouraged that there were enough women still interested in collaboration. She wrote, “whether in a radio or news interview or in a face-to-face conversation or meeting the women were keenly interested in

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

having and maintaining contact with women in the USA. They were full of ideas of ways in which we can be helpful.”<sup>273</sup>

The tour ended in Nigeria, where her host Lady Abyomi, women from twelve organizations, photographers and press greeted her at the airport. Nigerian independence lingered on the horizon and she had the opportunity to observe how women in Nigeria were preparing. Her hosts scheduled multiple sessions with women leaders which included market women, professionals, mothers, church women, business women among others. Height led sessions at the YWCA and also met with youth groups. Enthused by the “response and quality of participation,” Height was impressed by the women in Nigeria claiming “it will stand out in [her] mind for a long time.”

Height upheld her designated duty as an emissary of women’s organizing. At the YWCA, with over 200 women gathered for conversation, she shared how Ghanaian women were financing organizations with community chests. At the University College, students inquired about sit-ins and segregation in the U.S. South. One student asked about the “complacency” of African Americans. To his question, another student shared his experiences with U.S. racism while completing fieldwork in Knoxville, Tennessee and Height offered the necessary context explaining the current struggle for Black freedom in the United States.

Height left Nigeria to return to Council duties in mid-April. Her final commentary about her experiences with Nigerian women could be true of her travels across West Africa:

Women say proudly that training that is simply parliamentary procedures, constitutional matters, important though they may be, will not be enough. Mastery in building unified groups across lines of deep-seated differences, skill in establishing relationships, skill in

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<sup>273</sup> “Letter no. 4 from Miss Dorothy Height,” April 2, 1960, Box 17, Folder 6, Committee of Correspondence Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

organizing, planning and evaluating, knowledge of social problems and how to deal with them, sensitivity to bringing about social change are among the areas in which they place confidence for the content of training for an independent future”<sup>274</sup>

The conversations in which Height participated demonstrate the multiple terrains and issues West African women leaders navigated. In these emerging societies, increasing women’s participation in public life also meant addressing the vestiges of colonialism across class, ethnicity, and nationality which attempted to cement their marginalization. As they worked through their proposed course of action, it is clear as exemplified by the elder Sierra Leonean woman's message that the women “may not take over [the men’s] shoes, but [they] may take over their socks” that women leaders were aware of the political boundaries they would reach. The collapse of women’s groups under state control that women in Ghana, Guinea, and other countries encountered was a real example of their inability to totally reorganize these emerging societies since patriarchal dominance never intended to loosen its grip. Nonetheless, while they forwarded their own agendas to make more room for women in public life in emerging societies, women political and civic leaders across West Africa were invested in sustained collaborative work not only with other African women, but also with those in the diaspora. Even more, Height’s observations reveal that the conversation around internationalism was not reserved for the urban elite but discussed across segments of West African societies. As the urgency for African freedom intensified over the remainder of 1960, so too did women’s transnational advocacy.

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<sup>274</sup> “Letter no. 3 from Miss Dorothy Height,” April 10, 1960, Box 17, Folder 6, Committee of Correspondence Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

### *Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent*

Momentum among Council women to build stronger ties with African women reached a high point in 1960. Throughout West Africa, Height witnessed not only how they envisioned their new roles in their respective countries, but the transnational nature of their projects. The West African Women's meeting she participated in Sierra Leone was a precursor to a much more ambitious event planned for the summer of 1960. Slated for mid-July, the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent (CWAAD) aimed to bring together Black women from across the continent and diaspora for a ten-day summit in Accra, Ghana. The program would provide an international platform, like none other, specifically for Black women.

General Secretary of the National Federation of Gold Coast Women (NFGCW), Evelyn Amarteifio, initiated and led much of the event coordination. Like Mabel Dove, the urgency of African independence led many nationalist women into the international arena to broaden their networks, strengthen organizational capabilities and leadership, as well as expand their socio-political lens. As a highly educated, middle class woman, Amarteifio typified the professional clubwomen of her generation.

Amarteifio's international experiences in the 1950s transformed how she approached organizing around women's issues in Ghana. In 1953, recognizing a need for stronger leadership training, she traveled to Britain as the first Ghanaian woman to participate in a London YWCA program. Upon return, she founded a YWCA chapter with Annie Jiagge, Thyra Casely-Hayford, and other women leaders. This trip followed subsequent travel to the United States and later Jamaica. One critical outcome of this work was the founding of the NFGCW in the summer of 1953. Modeled after the Jamaican Federation of Women, Amarteifio believed that Ghanaian women's organizations could benefit from the umbrella structure. She coordinated with leaders

from Accra Women's Association, Accra Market Women Trader's Association, and Girl Guides to create the new group. The goals of the NFGCW were "fostering educational, cultural, and civic engagement, improving the economic condition of women and encouraging voluntary social services to improve women's legal position." They hosted meetings and community programs on vocational and leadership training, literacy, among other initiatives. Additional outcomes of Amarteifio's international travels included building friendships with women across the diaspora such as Amy Jacques Garvey, who encouraged her to open her groups' membership to diaspora women.<sup>275</sup> NFGCW became one of the largest and influential women's organizations in Ghana in the late colonial and early independence period.<sup>276</sup>

Organizing an international conference remained an interest of the NFGCW. They first attempted in 1955 and their efforts were blocked by the Convention People's Party. The CPP requested for the NFGCW to join the women's wing of the party, but as a non-political organization, Amarteifio did not want to lose the group's autonomy. In 1957, NFGCW sent congratulatory greetings to the women of Ghana in recognition for the country's independence, including a message with hope for "a joint conference with the women of Africa and the National Council of Negro Women within the next two years to further mutual aspirations."<sup>277</sup> Considering Vivian Mason's effort to build community in this period with African women's organizations, and her specific attempts to reach women in Ghana, it is conceivable that the two

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<sup>275</sup> Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life & Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 217-218.

<sup>276</sup> Biographical information of Evelyn Amarteifio and the founding NFGCW is based on: Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, "Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana," *Journal of West African History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 34-40, doi:10.14321/jwestafrihist.4.1.0027.

<sup>277</sup> "Ghana Women Hear NFGCW President Dr. Cartwright," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, May 18, 1957, pg. 6.



organizations had developed some kind of relationship, or at the very least, an awareness of one another.<sup>278</sup> In this context and the proliferation of primarily white international women's conferences, the NFGCW contemplated hosting a conference for women of Africa and African descent again in 1958.<sup>279</sup>

Amarteifio and her group organized over two years coordinating with Nkrumah's administration for support of the event. However, depending on State funding ultimately meant coming under its influence. Nkrumah approved the conference but "only if the conference were held under the auspices of the National Council of Ghana Women."<sup>280</sup> Amarteifio agreed in order to ensure that the event proceeded as planned. The other major women's group, the Ghana Women's League led by Hannah Kudjoe, was also folded into the NCGW.<sup>281</sup> CPP leader Sophia Doku led this new group.

In mid-July, with the Congo Crisis as a political backdrop, over 100 women from across the African diaspora gathered together. The goals were "to promote leadership and citizenship amongst women of Africa and African descent, to give the opportunity to discuss their common problems and how these could be solved, to promote friendship amongst women of Africa and African descent" as reported by Dorothy Ferebee and Jeanne Noble.<sup>282</sup> The cadre of women

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<sup>278</sup> Correspondence from Henry Fifie Mingle to Vivian Mason, May 12, 1955, Series 4 Box 23 Folder 1, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.; In Height's letter to the CofC Amarteifio was scheduled to meet her upon arrival to Ghana during her tour earlier in the year, "Letter no. 4 from Miss Dorothy Height," April 2, 1960, Box 17, Folder 6, Committee of Correspondence Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>279</sup> Sackeyfio-Lenoch, "Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana," 40.

<sup>280</sup> Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 41.

<sup>281</sup> For more on Hannah Kudjoe and the All- African Women's League see Jean Allman "The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History," *Journal of Women's History* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 13-35.

<sup>282</sup> "Report on the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent," 1960, Box 2, Folder 6, Africa-America Institute, Women's Africa Committee, November 23, 1959-August 24, 1961, Horace Mann

leaders in social and political life represented ten countries, with the largest delegations from Ghana, Liberia, and the United States.<sup>283</sup> Representatives from the United Arab Republic, Israel, and Tunisia also attended the conference. In all, they constituted a limited segment of the African diaspora since there was no representation from Southern Africa, francophone Africa, among other regions outside the continent. Nonetheless, women from across the diaspora who had long been engaged in building bridges among Black women leaders were present including Ferebee, Noble, Elsie Austin, and Mabel Dove.

Kwame Nkrumah gave the opening speech which set the tone of the conference. Originally planned as a non-political event focused on social welfare and women's common problems, under CPP influence the conference became both a product of state exhibition and a real practice in ironing out the meaning of transnational solidarity within the global struggle for Black freedom. Nkrumah's speech focused on the role of women in African liberation, upending the women's own intended agenda. He stood before the audience at Baden Powell Memorial Hall instructing them that if there is to be a union of African States to save the continent, then "not only can [women] carry back this message to the men of your respective countries ...if you are convinced that unity is the right answer, you can also bring your feminine influence to bear in persuading your brothers, husbands and friends of the importance of African unity as the only salvation for Africa."<sup>284</sup> As historian Nana Sackeyfio-Lenoch also suggests, Nkrumah saw their

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Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b027-f006>.

<sup>283</sup> "Report on Conference of Women of Africa from UK High Commissioner Office in Accra," August 1960, Foreign and Commonwealth Office\_ 141\_17846\_05, The National Archives, London.

<sup>284</sup> "Opening of Conference of Women of Africa By the President Dr. The Rt. Hon. Kwame Nkrumah at the Baden Powell Memorial Hall Accra 18th July 1960," July 18, 1960, Box 154-15, Folder 39, Kwame Nkrumah Papers, Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

roles not as strategists or thought leaders but as conduits to usher more men into the movement. The consolidation of Ghanaian women's organizations reinforced Nkrumah's vision for women and there have been several explanations (both historical and scholarly) for this action: intense competition between existing women's groups,<sup>285</sup> fear of their growing influence,<sup>286</sup> and that the new women's group was specifically created to politicize CWAAD.<sup>287</sup> According to Dorothy Ferebee, "three days before the Conference, the new Ghana Women's group took over the event, changed the theme and headquarters, reduced the conference period by four days, rearranged and rescheduled the program participants, and appointed Mrs. Florence Nylander, sister of Dr. Amarteifio, new head of the Movement."<sup>288</sup> Uncomfortable with the direction of the event and in consideration of the terms in which they all agreed to participate, some delegates from Liberia, the U.S., and Gambia successfully organized to reinstate Amarteifio as the conference chair. All explanations aside, State control of the event had a significant impact on the course of events.

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<sup>285</sup> "Report on Conference of Women of Africa from UK High Commissioner Office in Accra," August 1960, FCO\_141\_17846\_05, The National Archives, London.

<sup>286</sup> Jean Allman, "The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History," *Journal of Women's History* 21, no.3 (2009): 24-26.

<sup>287</sup> Adwoa Kwakyewaa Opong, "Rewriting Women into Ghanaian History, 1950-1966" (M.A. Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, 2012), 71- 93.

<sup>288</sup> "Report on the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent," 1960, Box 2, Folder 6, Africa-America Institute, Women's Africa Committee, November 23, 1959-August 24, 1961, Horace Mann Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b027-f006>.



Figure 2. Women discuss after the close of President Kwame Nkrumah's welcome address  
(©Bailey's African History Archive, Photography by Drum Magazine)

In a series of sessions, the group of leaders across political and civic life primarily discussed how best to support the needs of women on the continent. Council women within the leadership core took prominent roles during the event. New York Civil Rights attorney Anna Arnold Hedgeman gave the conference keynote titled "Women in Public Life" which, among many points, emphasized that women from all parts of society were essential to usher in a 'free and peaceful world.'<sup>289</sup> Attorney Pauli Murray, who moved to Ghana to help train the country's future lawyers, gave a presentation titled "The Legal Status of Women." Ferebee led a discussion on health education for women and children. Other discussion included leadership of women in business, civil life, and educational opportunities, legal and social rights for women, ending polygamy, raising health and living standards, uplifting African culture and better

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<sup>289</sup> Anna Arnold Hedgeman, "Women in Public Life," July 18, 1960, Box 13, Folder 6, Anna Arnold Hedgeman Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

representation of African history for school children. They agreed that more women in leadership roles across the board will achieve these goals. As a collective, they adopted seventeen resolutions which, among many other areas, focused on the struggle for freedom in Algeria, Congo, South Africa, and the United States. Other resolutions included recommendations for the study of the legal status of women, bureau for training in civic and volunteer work, vocational training, among others. Most importantly, they decided to meet again in two years in Tunisia.

However, the ideological crusades which characterized the Cold War outside of Baden Powell Memorial Hall were replicated there as well, shaping their debates. To this point, Historian Kevin Gaines described the conference as an “ideological battleground.”<sup>290</sup> This was particularly true for the U.S. delegation who were split into at least two blocs. The largest group were the leftists led by activist, writer, and Communist Party member Shirley Graham Du Bois. She moved to Ghana with her husband W.E.B. Du Bois and the pair represented a faction of African Americans whose critique of the U.S. racial regime and its accompanying processes of labor exploitation and gender inequality brought them under intense repression and State surveillance. The liberals included Ferebee, Noble and the contingent of other Council women and moderates who were invested in U.S. democracy and the cause of integration. The groups came to a head at the start of the conference when delegates organized themselves into a steering committee of three members from each representative country in order to manage administrative matters. Members of the leftist bloc attempted to nominate Shirley Graham Du Bois and other members from their own group to represent the U.S. delegation. Successfully blocking this effort, Ferebee denounced what she characterized as their “evident plan to condemn and vilify

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<sup>290</sup> Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 122.

the United States.” Described by Noble as the “non-Du Bois Americans,” she wrote that their goals were to “identify themselves with the African struggle for liberation and their African heritage...make clear the American personality, identity and heritage... [and] interpret the positive aspects of American democracy without denying its imperfections and the role of American negroes in achieving equality.”<sup>291</sup> For the group of Council women, their ideological commitment to U.S. democratic values grounded their engagement with African liberation.

Though Council women were committed to the work of relationship building, their position on the question of U.S. liberal democracy represented a striking ideological difference, not only within the U.S. group but, seemingly, among much of the conference delegation. In Noble’s description of these dynamics she wrote that the U.S. delegation was “plagued from the outset by a political struggle and by the fact that in many ways its interests were tangential to those of the African women.”<sup>292</sup> One moment of contention that underscored this occurred during a discussion of a resolution that initially intended to compare racial violence in the United States and South Africa. The Du Bois bloc was in favor; however, moderate women such as Anna Arnold Hedgeman and Pauli Murray were ardently against the comparison. Hedgeman’s biographer Jennifer Scanlon described her resistance to the existing resolution as an understanding that the two nations held fundamentally different founding principles.<sup>293</sup> The United States failed to live up to its promise of equality and freedom, while South Africa had no

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<sup>291</sup> “Report on the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent,” 1960, Box 2, Folder 6, Africa-America Institute, Women’s Africa Committee, November 23, 1959-August 24, 1961, Horace Mann Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b027-f006>.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 132.

such mandate. Hedgeman and Murray achieved their goal of protecting the image of the U.S. when the delegates settled the matter by agreeing on two separate resolutions: one that condemned the policy of racial segregation in South Africa and another which urged the United States to make more rapid progress toward freedom and equality for its citizens. Though some Council women believed in the U.S. government's capacity and willingness to advance racial justice, many CWAAD attendees did not regard the States with the same kind of exceptionalism.

According to Noble and Ferebee, CWAAD's focus on nationalism over commonality not only fell short of the conference goals but also contributed to a sense of alienation for some African American women. On one hand, they thought the event was necessary and an important platform to bring women together "for exchanging views for getting acquainted and for learning more of each other"<sup>294</sup> However, as Ferebee went on to write, "very little actual discussion was given to the common problems of women of Africa and African descent, except that identified as the urge for freedom, predominantly accented in all the major speeches." As Noble saw it, this maneuver negatively impacted her experience. She wrote, "As an American Negro, I did not feel at home; I felt away from home. Where women might have struck a harmonious note of kinship- on the better care of children and welfare problems; on the improved status of women and the enrichment of the cultural life of mankind- little time was spent in this Conference."<sup>295</sup> She agreed with Ferebee's observation writing, "the political overtones overshadowed these social concerns. The usual preoccupation with social and educational concerns, so characteristic of women's groups in democratic countries, was clearly relegated to an insignificant place in this conference." For instance, Graham Du Bois was scheduled to speak about the activities of

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 7.

women's groups in the United States, but instead discussed the large incarceration of African Americans in U.S. jails and mental institutions.<sup>296</sup> Clearly Noble and Ferebee's disapproval stemmed from their commitment to maintaining a positive image of the U.S. Though other participants were also strategists and organizers, they were loyal to Nkrumah's nationalist project, especially Graham Du Bois.<sup>297</sup> Noble asserted that one of the goals of their bloc was "to lift the level of the Conference from nationalist levels to international levels by stressing the common problems of women everywhere..."<sup>298</sup> While she believed that African American and African women indeed held common experiences of racial inferiority, she understood herself to be an American and held tightly to this identification.

Historian Kevin Gaines' analysis of Civil Rights attorney and CWAAD attendee Pauli Murray offers some insight into this position. He explains Murray's investment in the universality of American democracy and ideals. Nkrumah's increasing authoritarianism stood in direct contradiction to these tenets, pushing her further away from the cause of African liberation. Murray eventually left Ghana and in her reflections of her time there she further committed to a "normative Black identity aligned with the American nation and its national security imperatives," as described by Gaines.<sup>299</sup> However, not all racial liberal women took up this position. Hedgeman, for example, also devoted to U.S. democratic ideals, continued to

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Gerald Horne discusses how despite the increasingly authoritarian nature of Nkrumah's government, Graham Du Bois carried on with her duties voicing little to no opposition. Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 171.

<sup>298</sup> "Report on the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent," 1960, Box 2, Folder 6, Africa-America Institute, Women's Africa Committee, November 23, 1959-August 24, 1961, Horace Mann Bond Papers (MS 411), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums411-b027-f006>.

<sup>299</sup> Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*, 124.



defend Nkrumah's administration. Noble too advanced her own set of politics by maintaining her American identification as well as an interest in African developments, but she circumvented the shifting geopolitical tensions by separating them from women's issues. So where political ideology caused discord, she modeled an alternative strategy that attempted to exclusively focus on gendered issues. For Noble and Ferebee, outside of their ideological positions, it is likely that as leaders in large women's organizations, they understood that a common cause served as an effective organizing strategy when bringing people together.

Upon return to the States, the pair, along with Dorothy Height and a few distinguished guests participated in NCNW's International Luncheon at the Silver Anniversary Annual meeting in New York sharing their recent experiences related to women's organizing and Africa.<sup>300</sup> Shirley Smith, Executive Director of the Women's Africa Committee served as a moderator for the discussion. Noble reiterated that African and African American had a great deal in common. She explained that she learned "like the women across the world we are interested in the welfare of our children, and in the kind of things that women talk about and legislate about no matter where they meet on the face of the globe."<sup>301</sup> She noted that in both the US and Africa matters such as racial inferiority and racial pride were a point of conversation, especially as it relates to youth. Noble went on to share that among their dialogues, she felt most strongly about the idea that as Black people sort out their new roles in society they must reject a Eurocentric "carbon copy mentality," though this did not translate to Black Nationalism for her. Ferebee, who after CWAAD traveled to Nigeria for a similar meeting of Nigerian women, shared her observations about the social and economic differences in the country's regions. She

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<sup>300</sup> "Proceedings International Luncheon Forum," November 10, 1960, Series 10, Box 21, Folder 412, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington D.C.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

explained, “The one thing that all of the women are interested in is solidarity, and the abolition of polygamy...They have a real understanding of their needs and this real determination to do something about it.”<sup>302</sup> The women Ferebee interacted with also wanted their children to learn more about other African countries. In all, the Council women’s efforts to learn from and support African women’s advance into public life imparted important lessons. First, by being on the ground in conversation with other women leaders, Council women could develop a better understanding of the politics shaping life in emerging societies. This also offered an opportunity to interact with various cross segments of women leaders, as opposed to a select few who could travel to the United States. Their collective engagement with one another highlights that in this period a cross cutting segment of emerging African nations were considering the terms of their transnational solidarity while in conversation with one another as well as those in the diaspora.

### *The Civil Rights Africa Lobby*

At home, even in the midst of contentious domestic politics, African American interest in African affairs correlated with the pace of independence movements on the continent. The success of national movements in addition to base-building work by organizations like NCNW, contributed to shaping community consciousness in relation to Africa. As such, by 1960, these sentiments were heightened. Within the mainstream, a number of organizations joined the cause forming a Civil Rights Africa lobby led by the Civil Rights core known as the “Big Six.” The Six included Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Martin Luther King Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), A. Philip Randolph of the

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid, 8.

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, and, finally, Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women. The coalition's push for Civil Rights and more favorable foreign policy towards Africa grew in tandem. The Council's participation in the Africa lobby highlights the value of their work on the continent as well as the importance of international spaces for exercising Black women's leadership when limited within the domestic sphere.

Among the Civil Rights establishment, NCNW's grassroots experience on the continent uniquely positioned them to work at the interstices of Black diaspora interests at home and abroad. As one of the largest Black women's clubs in the United States, there were few organizations within the mainstream working across the spectrum of Black women's issues and even fewer that rivaled NCNW's established history of building relationships with African women leaders. As such, by the time of the first ANCLA meeting in 1962, Height and the Council's grassroots experience grounded in women's transnational organizing on the continent represented their unique contribution to the lobby.

Among the Big Six, there were varying experiences on the ground in Africa by 1962. King made two visits, first to celebrate Ghana's independence in 1957 (along with Roy Wilkins) and again in 1960 with an invitation by incoming Nigerian President Nnamdi Azikiwe.<sup>303</sup> Randolph's focus and expertise on labor organizing attracted him toward the African trade union movements in countries such as Tunisia, Ghana, as well as in East Africa in 1957.<sup>304</sup> As a member of the Black (and male) political elite, however, their time in Africa differed from

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<sup>303</sup> Lewis V. Baldwin, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 168.

<sup>304</sup> Yvette Richards, *Maida Springer Kemp: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 131-132.

Height. Though they were all in conversation with their political equals and people in decision making positions, Height's visits with leaders across various sectors of the local level and her focus on women's organizing exposed her to the day to day concerns of a wide population, contrasting the executive level dealings of many of her male counterparts. While the advocacy of others who had not (or could not for many reasons) travel were also valuable; the ability to spend time on the ground helped Council women like Height develop a more nuanced, though measured, understanding of Africa's many realities.

The ANCLA represented an early effort to coordinate and formalize the various Africa related advocacy campaigns among Black organizations in the United States. A central goal of the meeting was to develop a collective position on US foreign policy toward Africa. Political Scientist Alvin B. Tillery Jr. argues that the Bureau of African Affairs official under President John F. Kennedy, G. Mennen Williams, stimulated this endeavor to galvanize allies in civil society in order to advance progressive US-Africa foreign policy.<sup>305</sup> The Big Six comprised the event's Call Committee bringing together over 100 Black organizations on November 24-26, 1962 at the Columbia University Arden House in New York. NCNW delegates present included Dorothy Height, Dorothy Ferebee, Minnie Gaston, and Clara Wells. The group of leaders resolved to lobby the U.S. government to administer aid programs for Africa similar to those established for Europe as well as increase the number of Black officials within the State Department.<sup>306</sup> Their resolutions highlighted South Africa, South West Africa, Angola-Mozambique, Congo, Central African Federation and Kenya. On these issues, the group also

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<sup>305</sup> Alvin B. Tillery Jr., *Between Homeland and Motherland: Africa, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Black Leadership in America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011) 95-97.

<sup>306</sup> "ANCLA Resolutions," November 23-26, 1962, Series 10, Box 11, Folder 205, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

planned for the Big Six to meet with President Kennedy to share their findings from the conference. This meeting took place less than one month later on December 17, 1962.<sup>307</sup> The second ANCLA meeting took place in 1964.

The resolutions from the first ANCLA reflect for the most part their collective vision of the best direction for Africa, which may or may not have aligned with the desire of people on the ground. It is possible that their efforts to build consensus as well as avoid criticizing the Kennedy administration left little room to bring these subtleties to the fore- a subject in which Height and the NCNW would have been invaluable, and a concession in which they were also culpable. Compounded by the larger problem of sexism within the Civil Rights movement, Black women's leadership and perspective in the U.S. context were often undermined on the national level. One striking example occurred during the planning of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Part of the planning committee, Height recommended Anna Arnold Hedgeman, who gave the CWAAD keynote address, to the rest of the male delegation as the women's speaker at the event; however, they did not seriously consider the request.<sup>308</sup> As such, the historic demonstration had no Black women speakers, that is, no one to speak directly about their specific interests and contributions. In response, Height organized a meeting of Black women leaders for the day after the March, despite explicit direction to abstain.<sup>309</sup> For the sake of consensus, the lack of opportunities for Black women leaders to not only voice their concerns but offer their own vision for the global Black freedom struggle emphasized the importance of the

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<sup>307</sup> Chuck Stone, "JFK, 'Big Six' meet; discuss Africa and Colored Americans" *Washington Afro-American*, December 22, 1962, Series 10, Box 11, Folder 205, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.

<sup>308</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There is Justice*, 163-171.

<sup>309</sup> Rebecca Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood: The National Council of Negro Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018) 34-35.

spaces women created for themselves as a means of exercising their leadership on issues, including those on the international front.

Though it is difficult to decipher what specific input Council women offered during events such as ANCLA, it is clear that their experiences abroad qualified them for positions with the State Department. In 1961, Height accepted a role as a consultant to the Bureau of African Affairs under Kennedy. Between 1963 and 1965, Dorothy Ferebee made a second tour of Africa on assignment with the State Department to assess the condition of medical facilities. By 1967, she visited 19 countries on the continent as a representative of the State Department. She travelled around the country sharing her experiences and perspectives on Africa and informing her audiences of the needs of African people reported to her as it related to education, health, and other socio-economic concerns. Consistent in her speeches was the idea that support for African people must align with Africa's many contemporary realities, not based on outdated perceptions of the continent- to which she cited her own progression of understanding.<sup>310</sup>

It can be understood that these individual roles offer a select few a taste of power thereby hampering solidarity efforts. But, another perspective acknowledges the Council's long history of advocating for increased opportunities for women's leadership, especially at the federal level. They believed in the ability to effect change through the State because they saw the possibilities and impact in their domestic efforts. Also, their ability to access these spaces was

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<sup>310</sup> Dorothy Ferebee, "Officials of the Cultural Division of the United States Department of State, members of the Escort Interpreter Training Course," n.d. Box 183-9, folder 24, Dorothy Ferebee Papers, Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington D.C. ; Dorothy Ferebee, "Emerging Africa," April 23, 1963, Box 183-10, Folder 36, Dorothy Ferebee Papers, Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington D.C.; Dorothy Ferebee, "The Problems Confronting the African Peoples, As Seen Through the Eyes of an American," February 19, 1967, Box 183-9, Folder 36, Dorothy Ferebee Papers, Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington D.C.

central to their claims for full citizenship. These opportunities, though few and by no means comprehensive, mark supplementary spaces where Council women were able to employ their expertise and continue engaging Africa related issues.

### *Conclusion*

Under Dorothy Height's administration, the Council expanded their Africa centered international agenda through on the ground engagement with African women leaders. By partnering with other U.S. women's groups interested in Africa, they accelerated their program which aimed to increase the number African women leaders training in the United States. This exchange also took many Council women to Africa for the first time in this period. Height, under the sponsorship of the Committee of Correspondence, conducted a study of African women's training needs on a tour of West Africa. This experience exposed her to an array of women leaders across many levels as well as students, caretakers, business owners, and many others. Her reports offer an important perspective of African women's organizing around the new roles they envisioned for themselves within emerging societies. Most importantly, the very nature of their debates centered diasporic politics across segments of society, emphasizing interdependence not only among women on the continent but those with those abroad. These ideals manifested as the first Conference of Women of Africa and African descent, where women across the African diaspora came together to learn from one another and discuss their concerns. Additionally, they aimed to build consensus around Black women's leadership in a moment where geopolitics shifts held unprecedented opportunities. However, despite the fact that the successful wave of independence movements provided an opening for Black leadership on the global stage, the lack of regime change in the United States and the consolidation of patriarchal authoritarian regimes in Africa undermined Black women's collective agenda. Stateside, the Council's unique role as

arguably the foremost Civil Rights organization with grassroots experience on the continent stood to offer important contributions to the Civil Rights Africa lobby. Unfortunately, male dominated spaces and agendas stifled their perspectives. Nonetheless, Council women continued their engagement with Africa related issues on the national level through individual positions with the State Department and within NCNW.



## CONCLUSION

By the mid-1960s, the struggle against colonialism and maintaining African independence began to look much different. The 1960 Congo Crisis, further exacerbated by the Belgian government and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency coordinated assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, was only an early indicator in the future of African independence. Ghana, which led the cause of African unity, succumbed to a military coup resulting in Nkrumah's exile in 1966. Even prior to this development Nkrumah increasingly exercised authoritarian control of the country which resulted in the collapse of the women's movement under the control of the national party. Though Julius Nyerere in Tanzania attempted to carry the Pan-African torch thereafter, armed civil unrest and one-party states unfolded in countries like Nigeria. The political landscape was unlike the energy which defined the early independence era just a few years prior.

The nature of women's political organizing on the continent and in the States contended with these changes and the larger Cold War context. African women nationalists in many countries continued their advocacy for women's interests in new governments. In Ghana, for example, despite the impact of the military coup women from numerous groups came together to form the Ghana Assembly of Women in 1969.<sup>311</sup> Stateside, NCNW also maintained their interest in Africa related advocacy; however, the geopolitical crises and the formation of aid development programs shifted the character of US-Africa relations. In 1962, relying on her experiences at the CWAAD, the West African Women's Seminar in Nigeria, and throughout the rest of Africa, Dorothy Ferebee testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in

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<sup>311</sup> Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, "Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana," *Journal of West African History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 46, doi:10.14321/jwestafrihist.4.1.0027.

support of the Foreign Assistance Act. As the Council had been involved in bringing the concerns of African decolonization home to their own communities, she stated: "...we need in this country an informed public that knows something of the needs in Africa, that knows something of the problems of Africa, because they are seeking self-determination, they are seeking dignity and quality and justice for themselves and all their people."<sup>312</sup> The passage of the original Foreign Assistance Act created institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

By 1966, under Dorothy Height, NCNW received tax-exempt status as a non-profit. Where in the past, they did not have particular success directly funding their own international projects (such as African Children's Feeding Scheme), their new status allowed them access to other avenues of financial assistance to carry out their agenda. In 1975, after receiving a USAID grant, the Council organized a conference about the needs of women of African descent with Dorothy Height, Maida Springer Kemp, Dorothy Ferebee, among others as Council delegates, during the International Year of Women convening.<sup>313</sup> This was a marked difference from the politicized CWAAD in which Ferebee attended 15 years prior. Similarly, their programs focused on African women in this period heavily reflected the lessons learned from their own participation with African women's groups in the early independence era. According to historian Rebecca Tuuri, commenting on the Council's programming approach to their international work, Height stated "Women don't just want to receive the benefits...they want to have a hand in

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<sup>312</sup> Statement of Dorothy Ferebee, American Association of University Women, Washington D.C., Foreign Assistance Act of 1962, Senate committee on Foreign Relations, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, S-2996, April 5-18, 1962 (United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962) 452-454.

<sup>313</sup> Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood*, 189, Appendix 4.

the development”<sup>314</sup> It was the competence they gathered from their participation in WAC and Height personally learned during her tour of West Africa in 1960- African women were not interested in simple “how to” programs. The importance of their work at the height of independence is displayed in their own approach to international development.

This dissertation has explored NCNW’s transnational solidarity work with African women nationalists during the era of African independence. As the largest African American women’s club and the U.S. women’s organization with extensive experience forging relationships with women abroad, particularly in Africa, the Council was best positioned to advance women’s issues in the international arena. Founder Mary McLeod Bethune’s personal interest in Africa helped set the foundations for a politically active mainstream Black women’s group with an international agenda. The second world war and the immediate postwar period transformed NCNW, animating efforts to build bridges among Black women. In this same period where Bethune collaborated with prominent leftists such as Paul Robeson on anticolonial issues and began to develop relationships with women abroad, she was also publicly admonished by HUAC and the anticommunist agenda. Though she maintained an interest in Africa and international affairs, Bethune moved further right in an effort to protect herself and the organization. This made it possible for the organization to continue their international work. They pursued relationships with their counterparts abroad including Liberian educator Sarah Simpson George. Phi Delta Kappa national teacher sorority inspired by Simpson George’s visit with NCNW carried out a national literacy campaign for Liberian children. Simpson George not only helped establish a chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, but also founded her own women’s group

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<sup>314</sup> Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood*, 195.

which sent representatives to NCNW's annual convention. The importance of building relationships with African women intensified with emergence of African states.

Vivian Mason's administration made considerable advancements in developing "friendship ties" with African women. Mason's experience in international women's conferences, such as the 1945 Paris meeting, inspired her to reach out to Black women in Africa and the Caribbean because of their lack of representation at these events. As the inaugural chair of the international relations committee and then national president, Mason built relationships with Nigeria's Flora Azikiwe, Liberia's Ellen Scarborough, and Ghana's Mabel Dove. As the first African women legislature, Mabel Dove visited the U.S. under the sponsorship of NCNW exchange program with the State Department. Her visit came several years before the success of African independence campaigns and the flurry of African national leaders. Dove's interest in the U.S. racial climate and women's activities as well as her efforts to incorporate lessons from her time in the States into a new Ghanaian women's group reveal new dimensions of African women's movement.

The United Nations declared 1960 the "Year of Africa " and with this pronouncement came invigorated organizing by African women's groups who prepared for new roles in emerging societies. During this time, Dorothy Height led the Council. Under Height, Council women participated in cross-cultural (and political) exchange as a means of contributing toward the leadership development of African women and increasing African American women's capacity to engage US-Africa relations. Under the Committee of Correspondence, Height visited five West African countries to perform a study of leadership training needs of women's groups. Her letters about this trip provide an informative perspective on the rapidly changing and diverse political climates African women traversed. Ghana's Conference of Women of Africa and Africa

Descent, attended by Dorothy Ferebee and Jeanne Noble, was a significant effort by Black diaspora women to focus on their shared issues and sort out the terms of solidarity. However, state interference and the ideological contest which defined the Cold War ultimately shaped this event, taking its program under the influence on Ghanaian government interests. Height, Noble, and Ferebee shared their experiences with their communities' back home. As part of the Africa civil rights lobby, Height brought unique grassroots experience, however, the marginalization of women's leadership left little room for their expertise. Their advocacy helped open up more roles in the State Department for Black professionals, and these very same international experiences made Height and Ferebee eligible for consultant positions.

Bringing together the histories of African decolonization, Civil Rights, and Women's rights has revealed a dynamic history of shared interest, urgent organizing, and critical debate about the place of Black women in public life. African independence held great hope for the futures of African women, and as the Council saw it, the future of Black women's leadership. Their strategies, concerns, debates and challenges in this period offer new insights about the stakes of African independence as it related to a communal history between Black women on the continent and in the U.S.

## APPENDIX A

<b>African Women's National Organizations and Contacts with NCNW, 1935-1966</b>		
<b>Country</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Contact</b>
Ethiopia	Ethiopian Women's Work Association	Princess Tenagnework
Ghana	All African Women's League	Hannah Kudjoe
	National Council of Ghana Women	Sophia Doku
	National Federation of Gold Coast Women	Evelyn Amarteifio
Guinea	Democratic Party of Guinea*	Madame C. Lofu
Liberia	Liberian Women's Social and Political Movement	Sarah Simpson George
	National Federation of Liberian Women	Ellen Mills Scarborough
Nigeria	Nigerian Council of Women Societies	Lady Abayomi Oyinkan
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone's Women's Movement	Constance Johns- Cummings
	Sierra Leone Federation of Women's Organizations	Madame Ella Koblo Gulamo
South Africa	National Council of African Women	Minah Soga
	African National Congress- Women's League	Maddie Hall Xuma
Tanzania	Tanzania National Union- Women's Section	Lucy Lameck

Table 1. African women's organizations and contacts with NCNW as explored in this dissertation; \*Lofu represented Guinea's political party.

## APPENDIX B

### List of Leaders to Serve as Leadership Core\*

Dr. Jeanne L. Noble (Education)

Maida Springer

Vivian Mason (Education)

Shirley Smith

Edith Sampson

Eunice Carter (International)

Sadie Alexander

Ruth Mueller

Anna A. Hedgeman

\*Abbreviated list of NCNW leadership core

Source: Memorandum To: Dorothy I. Height, H. Elsie Austin and Dorothy C. Guinn, November 3, 1959, Series 4, Box 28, Folder 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH, Washington, D.C.)

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Kwame Nkrumah Papers  
Dorothy Ferebee Papers
- National Archives of Black Women Histories  
National Council of Negro Women's Papers
- Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture  
Anna Arnold Hedgemen Papers
- Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Committee of Correspondence Records  
Women's Africa Committee Records
- Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
Horace Mann Bond Papers (Digital Collection)
- Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles  
Mary McLeod Bethune Papers

### **Dissertations and Theses**

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