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Abstract
This essay examines the activism and scholarship of two South African sociologists and African Studies professors, Bernard Magubane and Anthony Ngubo during their time as graduate students at UCLA in the 1960s. Focusing on Magubane and Ngubo, I argue that migrant students from Southern Africa used research and protest politics to contest the postwar racial liberal ideology that dominated African studies and sectors of the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements from Southern California to Southern Africa. Ngubo, Magubane, and their colleagues united with the struggles of the Black working class in Los Angeles. They used their research and activism to challenge Cold War liberal ideas of life in California and the United States by likening the struggles of African Americans to the plight of Blacks in Southern Africa.

In November 1964, South African-born University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) graduate students Bernard Magubane, Martin Legassick, and Anthony Ngubo led the South African Freedom Action Committee (SAFAC). The formation of the radical student organization at UCLA was a part of an international revitalization of the anti-apartheid movement following the trial and conviction of Nelson Mandela and nine other defendants in Rivonia, South Africa. With connections to the South Africa Action Committee (SAAC) headed by Mazisi Kunene and the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) headed by George Houser, the SAFAC led a series of the first sustained anti-apartheid protests in Southern California history. That holiday season, the SAFAC began to protest banks that traded in South African currency, called for tourism boycotts of South Africa, and staged a 90-hour hunger strike following the conviction of the Rivonia defendants. Remarkably similar to the civil rights protests that had engulfed Southern California for
the previous years, the SAFAC protests revealed the rhizomes of political struggle that linked the struggles of African liberation in Southern Africa to the Black liberation struggles in Southern California. In this essay, I argue that migrant students from Southern Africa used research and protest politics to contest the postwar racial liberal ideology that dominated African studies and sectors of the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements from Southern California to Southern Africa.

Cold War liberal education programs recruited African students to American colleges and universities in an attempt to spread American political and cultural power at the height of “decolonial” struggles in Africa. Arguably, no American region was more representative of this trend than California, namely Southern California. In 1958, the United States Congress approved the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) following the successful launch of the satellite Sputnik by the Soviet Union the previous year. As part of the rollout of over $400 million in federal funding to academic institutions over two years, Title VI of the act provided funding for area studies programs and language centers at American higher education institutions.

The NDEA and the Space Race had an ensuing impact on California’s higher education system, resulting in the California Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960. The Master Plan embodied postwar embedded liberal policies, understanding that economic growth was reliant on a well-trained and expanding workforce. To meet these goals, the Master Plan created California’s three-tiered college system, consisting of associate’s degree-granting community colleges, bachelor’s- and master’s-granting state colleges, and state universities that granted bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. Increased federal and state funding to California colleges and universities resulted in a near 500 percent enrollment increase between 1960 and 1975 — from 227,000 students to 1 million. The NDEA funded regional centers for area studies, and UCLA became home to the University of California’s African Studies Center, which came to be headed by South African sociologist Leo Kuper.

The NDEA and Master Plan increased the enrollment of African students and African American students at American colleges. By the early 1960s, at least 3,000 African students had been sponsored to study in the United States, and nearly 200 were at UCLA.
Coupled with the rising numbers of African American students matriculating for the first time into California colleges, the central paradox of California Cold War educational policy emerged. While these embedded liberal policies were intended to introduce students of African descent into the American mainstream, in many cases, they fueled Black internationalist bonds, spurred civil rights, Black Power, and anti-apartheid activism, and helped these budding Black and African intellectuals sharpen their analysis of racial capitalism from Southern California to Southern Africa. Ngubo, Magubane and their colleagues challenged the idea of Southern California as a land of opportunity by likening the struggles of African Americans to the plight of Blacks in Southern Africa. This was done through academic research and direct action.

**Confronting Southern California’s Genteel Apartheid State**

In 1960, the population of African-born migrants in the United States remained very low at only 80,000. Despite federal restrictions on African immigration prior to the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, the NDEA played a role in increasing the African-born population by permitting federal funding to schools and private foundations to recruit African students to American institutions. Organizations such as the African-American Institute (AAI), African-American Students Foundation (AASF), and the African Scholarship Program of American Universities (ASPAU) provided funding for the relocation and funding of these students. However, as Ngubo and Magubane discovered, this funding was often not year-round and did not provide African students the ability to support their families. What is more, despite the expressed interest of liberal college administrators and politicians, African students were not inoculated from what Frantz Fanon termed “the lived experience of the Black” in the United States.²

Scholarship foundations often omitted that the funding did not include summer aid. Magubane and Ngubo were forced to take off-campus employment to help their families migrate to Los Angeles and support their families once they arrived. The only places Magubane and Ngubo found employment were among the Black working class. On weekends, Magubane and Ngubo worked at a car wash, and in the evenings they joined a crew of African American workers from South Los Angeles in the basement of a
local Kaiser Permanente building clearing and transporting files. “Most of the employees working those ungodly hours were African-Americans from Watts, whose highest attainment was a high school education,” Magubane wrote.³

Alongside labor struggles, migrant African students in Southern California experienced what the journalist Alexander Saxton described as genteeel apartheid—a bureaucratic system of anti-black oppression through which administrative systems of white power “either denied any discrimination existed or shifted responsibility to others in the system.”⁴ The San Diego State University student newspaper, the Daily Aztec, chronicled the struggles that Rhodesian students Frank Muchenje and John Kumbula had in finding off-campus housing. In one case, Muchenje and Kumbula were not merely denied residence at a complex contracted to house students, they were first quizzed on their views of apartheid and the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid. The landlord dismissed the liberation struggles of Southern Africans, expressed sympathy with the South African government and then told Muchenje and Kumbula there were no vacancies despite the presence of a sign that stated differently. The UCLA Daily Bruin chronicled similar struggles of African and African American students. In one such article, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) member and student activist Russ Ellis detailed chronicles of two unnamed South African students who my research suggests were in fact Bernard Magubane and Anthony Ngubo. Much like Muchenje and Kumbula, Magubane and Ngubo identified apartment complexes in West Los Angeles contracted to rent to UCLA students by University Housing, only to be “given every lame excuse” as to why these landlords could not house the men. Ellis noted that “year after year, hundreds of UCLA Negro students have had the exact same experience and have, likewise, failed to formally register a complaint” with University Housing.⁵ The Ngubo family eventually settled in a low-income housing complex with other families of color.

These experiences strengthened the political bonds between African students and African American liberation struggles. Magubane and Ngubo, for their part, befriended fellow African Studies student and head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Nationalist Afro-American Association Ron Karenga. Magubane and Ngubo helped Karenga learn isiZulu and other aspects of

Magubane remembered that 1964 specifically was a very emotional period for South Africans students in the U.S., noting, “We decided we had to do something.” During the previous spring, CORE and other civil rights coalitions held statewide protests against Bank of America for its Jim Crow policies. After learning that a bank on Wilshire Boulevard in West Los Angeles not far from the UCLA campus was selling Krugerrands through a local newspaper, they organized what was likely the first anti-apartheid protest in Southern California. The bank, Magubane remembered, took on a larger meaning as “a place where they could actually demonstrate.” In front of the bank, the UCLA students built a prison cell that Legassick, the white South African, occupied as a part of a 90-hour hunger strike. Just as CORE activists had done, the SAFAC challenged South Africa’s white power state through the use of public spectacle, financial measures, cultural work and inter-organizational solidarity. Just like CORE activists, they even gained the public support of James Baldwin.

**Excavating the Pepper Area Research Project**

Alongside their challenge to the white power structure that linked the United States and South Africa, Magubane and Ngubo also challenged liberal academia—namely the African Studies theory of pluralism. A South African cousin to American racial liberalism, pluralism pulled from the ideas of Max Weber, sociologists, and political scientists who sought “to look for a multiplicity of causes to explain political behavior rather than just class,” Magubane noted. “Pluralism was said to explain the importance of competing groups and diverse values in sustaining a stable democracy like that of the United States.” In pluralism’s support of notions of modernization
and American democracy, Magubane found the theory to be insufficient in explaining the conditions of African Americans and, eventually, South Africans. “The problem with pluralism... was that African Americans and their enslavement ceases to become an issue,” he said. “The rise of the civil rights movement and the Watts and other ghetto uprisings, and indeed the Black Power movement could not be accounted for in pluralist theory,” nor could pluralism explain the Ku Klux Klan, McCarthyism, and other white reactionary movements, Magubane remembered.  

Having been deeply influenced by African American academic and popular writing, Magubane and Ngubo began to pen their own interventions into African Studies and Sociology. The first intervention began with the primary research Magubane and Ngubo did in their home Natal Province for Leo Kuper’s *An African Bourgeoisie*. *An African Bourgeoisie* was arguably more a product of Magubane and Ngubo than Kuper. In *An African Bourgeoisie*, Magubane and Ngubo departed from E. Franklin Frazier’s classification of the African American petty bourgeoisie as a class apart from the Black American masses. Magubane and Ngubo found that only a nominal class division existed between Black middle class and the Black working class. In South Africa, the Black middle class was underpaid, overworked, and lived with the Black masses. Importantly, the Black middle class committed themselves to the liberation struggles of the South African working class. The next departure was with liberal studies of African American social problems. Nationally, the “Moynihan Report,” and locally, the McConne Commission Report on the Watts Rebellion, had identified that slavery and segregation were at the root of Black problems. These studies also proposed increased government expenditures for anti-poverty programming and heightened access to employment and education as solutions to the urban crisis. Yet, as a whole, they dismissed the immediate role of structural racism and deindustrialization in the American North and West and produced culture of poverty narratives that blamed the victims of slavery and racism for their conditions.

For Magubane, a synthesis of Marxism and the teachings of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam helped him to challenge racial liberalism and pluralism. For the first time, in California, Magubane was able to freely read the writings of Karl Marx. On reading *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* for the first time, Magubane writes:
Unlike Max Weber’s book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*, the Manifesto shows the cruel origins and development of capitalism, and exposes its intrinsic contradictions and the growing, deepening class antagonisms between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It also exposed the true nature of capitalist society, its brutal exploitation of the workers, its inhuman morality, and the unrestrained rule of greed which turns human relations into objects to be bought and sold, and regards human personal dignity, knowledge, and skills for their exchange value. It dealt with how it turned the exploitation and plunder of the weak by the strong into principal determining relations between nations, and between colonisers and the colonised. Indeed, the rise of capitalism had plunged whole nations into colonial bondage and inflicted on them its bloody wars of destruction. This was powerful stuff that Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism* was trying to hide.

Malcolm and the Nation of Islam also influenced the theoretical approach of Magubane and Ngubo. What Magubane found most interesting was the appeal to “the poorest of the poor.” Magubane found their ability to turn around the lives of drug addicts, pimps, sex workers, and criminals to be profoundly Marxist because it challenged the alienation of the Black poor and working class.¹³ At UCLA, Magubane and Ngubo began to read the writings of Black Marxists ferociously. Their new perspective on Black life emerged in the 1965 “Report of the Pepper Area Research Project,” a study of poverty and racism in a largely Black neighborhood in Northwest Pasadena sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). As Black Marxists, Magubane and Ngubo examined African American life in Pasadena with a level of dignity for Black laborers that other studies had lacked. The materialist interrogation of American segregation allowed Magubane and Ngubo to reconsider the meaning of race and class in the United States in a study which linked African American life to those of South African natives.

Magubane and Ngubo found results consistent with other socioeconomic trends in Southern California and even Southern Africa. Black Pasadena experienced vast population growth brought on by Black migration from the American South, and that population increase was met with increased residential segregation. From 1950 to 1960, Black Pasadena increased by 84 percent, from 9,800 to 18,000. Comparatively, the white population
increased by only 3.8 percent. The Black population in the predominantly white suburbs in Pasadena’s periphery decreased from 539 to 382 out of a total population of 454,147 residents. The Pepper Area was defined by the lowest real estate value, the lowest median income, and the highest rate of overcrowding. Magubane and Ngubo began their study by engaging the sample population of “apparently able-bodied men” who populated the streets and social areas on North Fair Oaks Avenue.

In preparation for their study, Magubane and Ngubo developed a number of working theses: the young men hung around because they had nothing to do; facilities existed for these young men that they simply did not know about; the community had natural leadership that could be located to assist in this problem; the AFSC was one possible source for assistance; and lastly “that ‘hanging’ about in the street” would eventually hurt the self-esteem of these young Black men.

Forgoing cultural analyses, Magubane and Ngubo found white power systems and structural inequality squarely culpable for Black living conditions. In fact, Magubane and Ngubo found that Black Pasadenaans maintained high self-image despite their lived experiences. Interviewees regularly remembered a 1937 campaign to legalize racial segregation in Pasadena as well as the more recent struggles to desegregate city pools and local dining facilities. Black Pasadenaans saw the Pepper Area urban renewal project as an attempt to dislocate Black people. Respondents to the study challenged the popular projections of the Pepper Area as decayed and dilapidated. Instead, the residents solidly believed this to be a discursive tactic intended to expedite the gentrification process. Magubane and Ngubo dispelled common myths of the Black poor and addressed the very real concerns for Pasadena’s high levels of Black unemployment and underemployment.

The dominant theory in social science was, and still is, that high rates of Black unemployment fueled gang participation and other notions of Black pathology. Yet, Magubane and Ngubo said: “Very early in our field experience we realized that the men seen on the streets were not exactly unemployed.” Undoubtedly recalling their studies of Black life and labor in South Africa, the Pepper Area study by Magubane and Ngubo advances an alternative view of the Black middle class, working class, and underclass. Magubane and Ngubo noted that the reason Black men hung out
at the local pool hall or bar “was due to irregular working hours, temporary employment, or part-time employment.” Some of the men interviewed at these places were actually union members and construction workers who reported every morning to the union halls for work. “If there is no work that day, they ‘hang’ around” these places joined by older and retired people. Far from feeling content with their social position, these underemployed Black men expressed regular dissatisfaction with economic opportunities in Pasadena argued that the city was unprepared “to employ Negroes except in menial jobs.” Employment discrimination and alienation did not produce political inactivity. Magubane and Ngubo attended three community meetings where young adults expressed concerns over three interlocking issues: policing violence, unemployment, and inaccessibility to recreational facilities.

Police violence complicated Black attempts to search for employment beyond the Pepper Area, Magubane and Ngubo found. Interviewees complained that officers regularly drew their pistols on routine traffic stops. Black people stopped in nonwhite areas were always subjected to intense scrutiny and background checks before being released. Magubane and Ngubo observed that police abuse and incarceration of Black youth presented a “double threat” as it prevented young Black men with police records from gaining employment. This exclusion overdetermined the likelihood that Black people would commit crime to survive. This preceded the crucial intervention the Black Panthers would carry out in the years that followed.

A local Boys Club did provide refuge for Black youth but only for those between the ages of 7 and 18. Young adult men between 18 and 21, Magubane and Ngubo found, were “the most neglected section of the population.” While Magubane and Ngubo suggested that a sense of hopelessness had fallen upon these young men, it is not referenced as a psychological pathos but instead an admission of the material conditions facing Black youth. “Their helplessness,” Magubane and Ngubo wrote, “is confounded by the awareness that forces beyond their control, such as what they call the ‘white power structure’ and race prejudice, rule their lives.”

Despite evidence of Black political activism, these social conditions left a void of significant Black political leadership in Pasadena. If existent, the Black leaders were described as “nice
Negroes” tasked by white political economic powers with keeping the community in line. If an indigenous leadership was going to emerge, Magubane and Ngubo argued, it would be among the Black business owners. The redevelopment project had negatively affected Black business owners just as it had the residents. Owners of Black businesses—barber shops and beauty parlors, a mortuary, a bar, liquor stores, restaurants, and electronic repair shops—depended on the sustained wealth of the community. As Black residents faced increased unemployment and underemployment or moved outside of the area, Magubane and Ngubo found that Black businesses suffered and faced imminent replacement with white-owned industrial firms. There were no guarantees that Black business owners would be allowed in the proposed shopping centers. White businesses benefited from the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce, which lobbied the government on their behalf. The African American businesses had no such representation and thus, just like other residents, suffered from a lack of sufficient political organization. While the white-run Chamber of Commerce had opened its doors to Black membership, Magubane and Ngubo concluded that this was not a sufficient remedy. They found that Blacks needed autonomous political and economic power to collectively overcome the problems that the Black poor and Black business owners faced.

To solve the problems of the Pepper Area and Black Pasadena, the alienated youth and the business leaders needed external support from the government and groups like the AFSC and to work together to improve the conditions of their area. The suggestion by Magubane and Ngubo that Black business owners organize and provide the political leadership could very easily be read as Black capitalist, but that would be an incomplete reading. Considering their fieldwork with the South African middle class and their increasing engagement with Marxist and Black radical literature, the Pepper Area Research Project makes a discerning observation about Black life in Pasadena. To use the late Stuart Hall’s well-known but often misused quote, race for Black Pasadena was surely “the modality in which class is lived.” Though it often eludes academics, Hall’s specific reference was about racial formation in South Africa’s apartheid state. Accordingly, it was the great Black Marxist intellectual C.L.R. James who defined “black workers as all who labor or whom colonial powers” aimed to exploit. Still, the same is true of Southern California. Similar to Africans in Durban,
middle class jobs had not altered the social or physical geography of the African American bourgeoisie in Pasadena. Due to residential segregation, Black business owners lived in the same community as the Black poor and experienced similar forms of alienation as the Black working class. Drawing on their research experiences and political activism in Durban, Magubane and Ngubo attempted to locate grassroots leadership that could take immediate action for the Black community in Pasadena. The logical conclusion was the Pepper Area of Pasadena needed the unification of the Black working class and Black middle class for the defeat of a common foe.

Magubane and Ngubo had been influenced by Frazier’s study of the African American middle class, but they departed from it. Frazier argued that the Black middle class separated themselves from the working class and identified with white culture from which the Black middle class was also alienated. In the Pepper Area Research Project, Magubane and Ngubo abandoned Frazier’s thesis. They did not identify class conflict within the Black community as a source of Black social problems. Nor did they blame socially alienated Black youth. Magubane and Ngubo argued that white cultural hegemony and political economic forces were the overdetermining factors in African American life. The only solution to overcoming those conditions, from Southern California to Southern Africa, was mass mobilization.

**Conclusion**

In his iconic “Ballot or the Bullet” speech (1964), Malcolm X underscored the contradictions of the Cold War Civil Rights American society that Black people in the US encountered: “We don’t see any American dream; we’ve experienced only the American nightmare. We haven’t benefited from America’s democracy; we’ve only suffered from America’s hypocrisy. And the generation that’s coming up now can see it and are not afraid to say it.” Bernard Magubane, Anthony Ngubo, and thousands of other African students drawn to the United States experienced that same American nightmare. For African students from South Africa, and by extension other Southern Africans like those from Rhodesia, these contradictions were even more pronounced because their lived experiences in the United States directly recalled the colonial conditions they sought
to escape in their home countries. Magubane and Ngubo represent this generation of African students.

In Los Angeles, Magubane and Ngubo experienced the general conditions of what became known as *domestic colonialism* by Black Power activists. Magubane and Ngubo experienced housing segregation and labor exploitation. They witnessed the impact of incarceration and police violence on the lives of Black people in the U.S. This shared experience produced the solidarity Magubane, Ngubo, and other African students had with the Black liberation struggles in the U.S. More importantly, it also birthed the antiapartheid movement in Southern California and produced the ideological interventions that changed Black radical scholarship on campus as well as Black radical activism off-campus. At UCLA specifically, the SAFAC laid the foundation for the collective of Radical African Studies students, the African Activists Association (AAA) and their journal *Ufahamu*, to which Magubane was an early contributor.

The actions by UCLA civil rights and anti-apartheid activists in 1964 prompted three generations of African liberation struggle in Southern California, with each succeeding generation building on the activism of the others. Recalling the 1964 SAFAC protest, in 1985 AAA student activists were part of a coalition of students who organized Mandela Village, a shantytown in UCLA’s plaza built in protest of apartheid in South Africa as well as a host of other internationalist issues. On May 7, 1985, activists from Mandela Village led a protest towards Wilshire Boulevard where they protested a number of banks, including Bank of America. With the leadership of Black students from Africa and the United States, radical students at UCLA eventually won their battle to force the University of California to divest from South Africa. The struggles of the SAFAC and other African students during the Cold War Civil Rights era serves as a direct example. The experience of these students still serves as an example.

In the last 26 years, since the theoretical collapse of apartheid in South Africa, there has been a significant shift in academia. Since 1994, there has been a significant increase in internationalist scholarship but a noticeable decrease in internationalist activism. Magubane went on to complete a dissertation, and later a book, that examined the historical bonds between Blacks in the U.S. and Africa. This study eventually became *The Ties that Bind: African-American Consciousness of Africa* (1987). *The Ties that
Bind was as much about the African American idea of Africa as it was about the internalized notions of Africa of those born on the continent. Black people never rejected Africa, Magubane argued; they have historically rejected the hegemonic colonial depictions of Africa. Since 1964, this contradiction has resurfaced.

In 2013, I attended the Afrikan Black Coalition (ABC) Conference at the University of California San Diego. The previous fall, I had attended another conference of progressive students at the University of California Riverside. In both conferences, I participated in some of the most progressive actions to have taken place in the history of the University of California and other California colleges and universities. Students drafted resolutions in support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement. There were calls to end immigrant detention and police terror and to abolish mass incarceration. Unfortunately, there were also long paralyzing debates over whether Black people in the U.S. were African; there were also comparisons between the micro-aggressions experienced by students from African communities that had recently migrated versus those experienced by Black students born in the U.S. On one level, these conversations represent the material contradictions of post-Proposition 209 life on California campuses where Black students have been squeezed out. On another level, they represent the global contradictions of the Black middle class. The activities and research of Magubane and Ngubo provide resolution to these contradictions.

Magubane and Ngubo challenged Cold War liberal ideology, united with the Black working class and organized for Black liberation. They let their experiences in the U.S. inform their calls for the international liberation of African people. The flip side of the experience of Magubane and Ngubo was that Black students in the U.S. experienced similar emerging forms of internationalism. In 2015, African students expressed forms of Black Internationalist unity with the overlapping of Black student struggles in the US and #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in South Africa, but that has largely dissipated. As UCLA students, Magubane and Ngubo lived, worked, and struggled with the Black working class of Los Angeles. As international students, Cold War scholarship programs had promised them the American Dream, but they experienced the American nightmare. Their response to these contradictions provides a lesson for student activists today.
Notes


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid, 2.


20. Ibid.

