“In a Solid Bond of Unity”
Anticolonial Feminism in the Cold War Era

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This article contributes to an emerging body of literature addressing the issue of women’s activism in twentieth-century anticolonial movements. In the post–World War II era, African American and South African leftist women attempted to unite feminist movements against Jim Crow in the United States and apartheid in South Africa. I argue that although historians have often pointed to tensions between nationalist and feminist goals in postwar movements for self-determination as the reason transnational organizing so often failed, they have overlooked the significance of anticommunist government intervention in this organizing. Thus, an exploration of the short-lived link between the African American Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ) and South Africa’s African National Congress Women’s League (ANCWL) complicates current notions about nationalism’s relationship to feminism, and feminism’s relationship to the failure of nationalist causes.

In late September 1951, one hundred and seventeen African American women from across the nation traveled to Washington DC determined to convince U.S. officials that the government’s Cold War policies could not achieve peace and freedom abroad until they “protect[ed] the lives . . . and liberties of 15 million of its own Negro citizens.”¹ Before setting off on their “sojourn,” they sent letters declaring their views on the inextricable link between racial equality and permanent world peace to President Harry Truman and the secretaries of state, defense, and justice, requesting meetings with each to press their points.² On the eve of their confrontation with government officials, the Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ) held their first meeting in the Cafeteria Workers Union building, where poet and actress Beulah Richardson read “A Call to Negro Women” inviting black women to join the liberation movement.³ Eslanda Goode Robeson, among others, addressed the group on her experiences as a leftist activist with government harassment. Not surprisingly, the STJ found that neither the president nor his department secretaries were eager to meet with delegations of militant African American women who had come to Washington to demand equality and peace.

At the same time, over eight thousand miles away, black women working through the African National Congress Women’s League (ANCWL) in the Union of South Africa united around many of the same issues that brought the Sojourners to Washington. Organized to protest the implemen-
tation of apartheid, the “Defiance of Unjust Laws” campaign launched in June 1952 announced the start of a militant phase of the ANC’s resistance to colonial rule. Women working in the organization, like their male counterparts, protested white supremacy by entering areas reserved for whites in public spaces. According to one report, women in the region of the Eastern Cape made up nearly half of all protesters.4

Letters from STJ leaders to South Africans written months after their sojourn revealed that Americans were inspired by the work of the women of the ANC. “We salute the women of Africa and hold out our hands to join yours in a solid bond of unity,” one letter read, explaining that “these struggles for full freedom on the part of colored women in Africa, Asia and in these United States must lead to the complete emancipation of women throughout the world.”5 In one powerful sentence the women of the STJ thus joined postwar Left-feminist and, in their support of the antiapartheid movement, nationalist agendas.6 ANCWL secretary Bertha Mkhize replied that South African women were “overjoyed” to learn of the support of their American sisters and expressed surprise that they knew of their struggles in “preaching freedom to African women.” Mkhize, a onetime labor activist, asked the Americans to “never mind my broken English because I am a proper Zulu woman,” while proclaiming, “you have made it possible the link with you we have always wished for this side of the world.”7

Government harassment on both continents ensured that the link Mkhize so earnestly celebrated would never become an alliance. Nonetheless, this short-lived embrace of a shared agenda raises important questions about the intersection of gender and nationalism in the nascent Cold War, suggesting that for a brief moment black women organized internationally not only around the issue of white supremacy, but also around matters concerning women’s oppression.8 Working within an antiapartheid movement, South African women created a model of postwar anticolonial feminism that was, like the work of the STJ, attentive to the significance of race and class.9 Moreover, their success in uniting racial and gender emancipation ideologies with the support of mixed-sex, racially integrated nationalist organizations complicates critiques that nationalist movements have historically discouraged women’s attempts to address feminist concerns. Indeed, the STJ and ANCWL’s activism on behalf of both women’s emancipation and the black nationalist goal of self-determination challenges the claims of many that “nowhere has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than a maidservant to nationalism.”10

In the past decade, historians have contributed to a growing literature on the significance of anticolonial alliances following World War II. They have convincingly argued that after the war African American leftists committed to eradicating white supremacy across the globe attempted to
unite a burgeoning civil rights movement at home with movements for self-determination in Asia and Africa. Ultimately thwarted by anticommunist politics, the story of leftists’ efforts at Pan-African unity was obscured by their increasingly unpopular radical activism. Recent works by Brenda Gayle Plummer, Thomas Borstelmann, and Penny von Eschen, among others, have returned these activities to the master narrative of postwar U.S. history. Still, a sustained gendered analysis of this activism remains largely absent from current literature.11

As Sidney F. Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley observed in 1994, “the failure to adopt a serious gendered analysis has been perhaps the biggest weakness in Diaspora studies, in general, and the historiography of Pan-Africanism in particular.”12 It is this elision that has concealed the distinctive, though short-lived, anticolonial feminism developed by postwar African American and black South African women in the early 1950s through such organizations as the Sojourners for Truth and Justice and the African National Congress Women’s League.13 As is the case with many marginalized groups, sources concerning the work of leftists in such groups as the STJ and ANCWL are limited.14 However, examining the work of the most well-documented women in these organizations opens up discussion of a wider landscape than is currently documented in studies of Pan-Africanism and suggests that their activism is significant not because it represents a mass feminist movement but because it challenges many assumptions about the attempted subordination of women’s concerns in anticolonial organizations.

While the work done by postwar leftists does not represent the first time that women’s activism combined feminist and anticolonial causes, the Cold War context rendered it uniquely threatening to anticommunist governments. Black liberals in this period in organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) also expressed anticolonial views.15 Yet many of these more mainstream leaders of the African American community ultimately embraced the U.S. government’s Cold War anticommunism and thus separated themselves from leftist radicals in African nations seeking to overthrow colonial rule and its racist legacy.16 Just as the work of these anticolonial feminists invites a reexamination of the relationship between feminism and black liberation movements, it also begs reflection on the long-term effects of government repression on transnational women’s organizing. The activism of these leftists, with its potential to organize women globally, made them a particular threat to the U.S. and South African governments, where social and political order was built upon racial segregation and strict policing of national borders. Cold War policymakers concerned about national security were wary of groups
organizing across national boundaries, especially when they reached beyond the “iron curtain” that supposedly isolated the Soviet Union and its satellites from the West. As the histories of the STJ and the ANCWL attest, the possibility that black women might be drawn to Soviet communism based on its professed belief in racial and gender equality led government officials to closely monitor and then harass radical women’s organizations. The fact that some anticolonial feminists were indeed communists or supported the communist agenda as fellow travelers clearly added to government anxiety and Cold War repression.

Tracing the politicization of anticolonial feminists, which in some cases dates back to the 1910s, helps to illustrate how the 1950s became their decade of defiance. Although many of the women who shaped this movement never met one another, the early lives of those like the ANC’s Bertha Mkhize and STJ’s Eslanda Goode Robeson shared remarkably similar paths that led them to their mutual commitment to racial and gender liberation. Born the daughter of a Zulu ox wagon driver in 1889, Mkhize’s early years prepared her well for the work that she would take on as a pioneer for African women’s rights. While she was a young girl, her mother moved the family from their home in Zululand so that Bertha could attend the same American missionary school attended by her mother; shortly thereafter her father died. Located outside the port city of Durban, Inanda Seminary was one of the first private schools to educate black girls in South Africa. The influence of her Christian education had a profound effect on the young Mkhize, who later in life claimed, “All I think about I got from Inanda.”

Historian Shula Marks has written that the education of young girls like Mkhize in Protestant missionary schools, unlike Catholic education which emphasized obedience, promoted independent and critical thought and that this view was so widely held that “Africans identified Protestant churches with progress.” Illustrating the point, Mkhize recalled that in her years at the seminary instruction, including preaching, was done by women, some of whom had husbands residing with them at the seminary. This early education no doubt encouraged her to hone the skills essential to her critique of race and gender hierarchies in South African society.

Like Mkhize, Robeson’s father died when she was still quite young and her mother moved the family to gain access to better education, in this case to New York City. Born in 1896 in Washington DC, Eslanda was raised in a “household wide awake to every phase of the Negro problem in America,” largely because her maternal grandfather, Francis Louis Cardozo, had been a leader on race relations in his native South Carolina. Like Mkhize’s mother, Eslanda’s mother oversaw her children’s schooling, instilling in them the belief that education was key to a successful life. Both Robeson and Mkhize, therefore, attained unusually advanced educations for black
women, training them to operate in worlds dominated by white men. Perhaps because of this shared background, their lifelong activism would be fueled by a similar commitment to the wellbeing of black communities, which in their view hinged on achieving gender and racial emancipation. A host of issues embodied their commitment to liberation, including workers’ rights and global peace, yet Mkhize, Robeson, and their Left-feminist coworkers labored within groups like the ANCWl and STJ that organized around the issue of the bodily integrity of black women—a concern that stood at the very center of the intersection of race and gender.

In South Africa, as in the United States, this issue had deep roots. Even before the creation of modern South Africa in 1910, bodily integrity was at the center of black women’s resistance to white supremacy, most visibly through protests against pass laws. Though they were first issued in the early nineteenth century to control the movement of newly emancipated slaves, a “mineral revolution” following the discovery of gold and diamonds late in the century placed increasing importance on passes to manage the labor of black South Africans. The institution of passes, which blacks were required to carry at all times and could only be obtained through white employers, forced Africans into low-paying wage labor in such white-owned industries as mining and agriculture, and into domestic service.

Although early pass laws did not include women, by the late 1890s municipal laws, which created a patchwork of regulations, increasingly covered both men and women. Opposition to legislation forcing women to carry passes came to a head in 1913 in the province of Orange Free State, when women appealed to the newly formed Union government. Among the compelling arguments they made against the legislation was the contention that searching for passes encouraged the sexual violation of women’s bodies. During the 1913 protests, opponents cited recent cases in which officials allegedly raped young girls after stopping them to check their passes. Protestors found an ally in the national government, which did not support the municipal laws because it believed the “patriarchal custom” of traditional tribal life would keep African women in the reserves. Legislation passed in 1923 exempted women from carrying passes, but the policy would change in the 1950s with the introduction of apartheid. Once again, black women activists would link protests against racial discrimination with assaults on their bodily integrity.

Following World War II, political and economic changes brought on by the war helped to create an environment for militant protest by women in both the United States and South Africa. Cherryl Walker’s observation that in the South African Union, growing activism “was fired by the rapid proletarianisation of blacks, the rising cost of living, the acute housing shortage in the towns, and rising black expectations in the midst of a ‘war
for democracy,’” just as accurately describes postwar America, where the migration of blacks to northern industrial centers produced many of the same phenomena.27 Thus, as white South Africans embarked on a project to rigidly formalize a racially segregated social and legal system, African Americans also experienced the tightening of Jim Crow when wartime changes and returning veterans threatened to undermine the U.S. racial status quo.

The threat of pass laws to the integrity of black South African women brought activists like Bertha Mkhize into conflict with the postwar government. Issues surrounding the relationship between the laws and sexual virtue were raised when, after years of rule by the United Party, the Afrikaner-led National Party won elections in 1948 and began to institute a rigid system of apartheid or racial separation.28 As with earlier attempts, a 1950 proposal to require passes of black women outraged both men and women. One Communist Party official asked, “Can you imagine the abuses and scenes which will take place when policemen accost women and search them for the hated pass?”29 Especially offensive was a clause that required medical examinations for black women employed in urban areas. Government officials claimed the provision would help to control venereal disease, yet natives understood it as a comment on the virtue of African women. Bertha Mkhize pronounced the proposals “disgusting” and vowed “the fight is on!”30

Mkhize’s militant organizing began years earlier with her politicization in the nascent South African labor movement. Following a brief career teaching, she “tired of whipping people’s children and always talking, talking, talking,” and in the late 1910s convinced her brother to teach her the trade of tailoring.31 More than a growing intolerance for the behavior of unruly children, her decision to eschew traditional women’s work in favor of a trade dominated by white and “coloured” men in South Africa reflected Mkhize’s mounting desire to confront her marginalization as a black woman. Indeed, at age twenty she sought and was granted status as an emancipated woman, a decree that excluded her from South African laws classifying women as perpetual minors under the authority of male family members until marriage, when their husbands assumed guardianship.32 From an early age, perhaps a response to watching her mother struggle following her father’s death, she challenged gender custom and law that kept “a woman’s political relation to the nation . . . submerged in a social relation to a man.”33 Having gained her gender emancipation, she joined a burgeoning labor movement in the 1920s to challenge her racial status. Five years after its founding by Cape Town dock workers in 1919, the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa (ICU) established a Durban branch, and Mkhize became a member. Mkhize credited the
ICU with challenging white supremacy through labor law. Citing legal cases where union lawyers successfully sued white employers engaged in “cruel” labor practices, she considered the union’s assault on the unfair treatment of blacks at the hands of the ruling white class its most important legacy. An indication of the union’s commitment to recruiting women, Charlotte Maxeke, who was a key figure in forming the ANCWL and known to many as “the mother of African freedom,” also headed the ICU’s women’s league. Yet a host of problems plagued the organization from its inception, most notably personality conflicts among its leaders. Despite building a membership of over 100,000, which made it the largest trade union in the history of the continent, the ICU split into a number of smaller unions in 1930, diminishing its influence. Historians nevertheless credit the organization with introducing activists like Mkhize to the direct action tactics and strategies embraced by the nationalist movements of the 1950s and early 1960s.

After the demise of the ICU, Mkhize combined her commitment to gender and racial emancipation by bringing her organizing skills to the ANCWL. At its founding in 1912, the ANC was a decidedly conservative, middle-class organization led by well-educated black professionals committed to legislative remedies to South African white supremacy. Under the provisions of its constitution, adopted in 1919, women were ineligible for full membership, including voting rights, but could join as “auxiliary members.” To make a place for women in the organization, leaders sponsored the Bantu League and the National Council of African Women, organizations committed to racial uplift. In 1943, under the leadership of longtime activist Madi-Hall Xuma, the ANCWL finally formed and granted women full membership. Proposed pass law legislation in 1950 gave ANCWL members a high-profile issue around which to rally. Leaders active in protests included Cape Town’s Dora Tamana, a member of the Communist Party South Africa (CPSA), who was also involved in squatter movements. Fellow CPSA member and ANCWL Eastern Cape president Florence Matomela is credited with leading Port Elizabeth protestors in burning their passes. The activism of Tamana, Matomela, and others illustrates that although relations between the two organizations were often tense, cross membership between the ANC and CPSA was common. These ANCWL organizers would come to the fore during the Defiance campaign, as women moved their activism beyond the local to a national arena.

As an ANCWL provincial secretary, Mkhize chaired a 1950 Durban anti-pass meeting where many expressed the same concerns about the bodily integrity of women and the impact of racial discrimination on black communities that the American Sojourners would at their founding a few months later. Confronting the issue of pass laws in terms of their effect on
black families, one Durban attendee claimed, “The passes have reduced our husbands to slavery and have caused our sons to fill the jails.” Her sentiments evoked both the indignation of living under white supremacy and a longstanding tradition of women engaging concerns about family and community to confront social injustice. With the 1913 Natives Land Act, the white government of South Africa had set aside 7 percent of all the country’s land for black occupancy, leaving 83 percent for whites who made up approximately 20 percent of the population. The so-called black “reserve” areas were intended to support the migrant labor, nearly always male, flowing into the mines and industries of the urban areas. As Walker has explained, “women left behind came to play an increasingly important part in keeping the subsistence economies of the reserves functioning and, thereby, reproducing the supply of migrant workers.” Men joined women in arguing that this vital role within the family entitled women to exemption from pass laws.

The anti-pass position taken by the African community valorized the traditional role of women in the home, offering those like Mkhize a political platform otherwise denied them. Discussion of the crucial reproductive labor performed by women whose male family members had migrated in search of work emphasized that women’s increased family obligations entitled them to political rights. Therefore, even child-free women like Bertha Mkhize, who never married, sometimes engaged maternalist arguments when confronting government officials about pass law legislation. In the 1920s, after leading a march on the office of the Durban Native Commissioner, Mkhize informed a government official that proposed pass regulations would greatly complicate mothers’ access to their children’s fathers. In a dramatic example, she suggested that fathers would not learn of a child’s death until long after the fact if the state obstructed women’s ability to freely travel. Standing amid a crowd of angry women, Mkhize later remembered the magistrate declaring, “I understand what they are talking about and, now, from today onwards no Native woman shall carry a pass.” This would be a short-lived concession. However, concerns about the welfare of families, including the possibility that children might be neglected if mothers were jailed for violating pass laws, were at the heart of arguments concerning women’s authority over their bodies, forming the basis for their protests for the next six decades.

Placing family and community at the center of their activism allowed African working-class women to draw upon a “politics of respectability” that challenged negative stereotypes about blacks. Similar to the middle-class African American uplift ideology adopted by many women reformers following Reconstruction, the rhetoric used by African women drew attention to their roles as nurturers and protectors. This offered a counter
discourse to white images that presented them as intellectually inferior, sexually promiscuous, and, in its most callous construction, diseased. Emphasizing their roles as mothers and protectors of their daughters’ virtue allowed women to confront exploitation by insisting that sexual honor was as meaningful to African women as it was to European women. Thus, the language of family and community provided a “nexus between respectability and protest,” suggesting the subversive possibilities sometimes concealed in seemingly conservative ideologies.45

At the same time that it offered them modest power within their communities, community-based feminist politics made inroads in antiapartheid movements. Although tensions remained between women’s autonomous organizations and male-dominated progressive organizations, some South African women leaders bridged the divide.46 Bertha Mkhize found that as a member of the ANC Committee in Durban her activism offered decision-making opportunities that made her equal with male leadership while at the same time providing a forum to voice women’s concerns. Mkhize claimed, “the ANC talked with [sic] everybody’s problem whether you are a man or a woman,” attracting women members “from all over the Union” as a result.47 Her financial independence, a unique position for a black woman in South Africa, perhaps added to the confidence Mkhize felt in her standing as a women’s leader and her ability to attempt alliances with progressive forces like the STJ from within the ANC.

While Mkhize brought to her postwar activism an impressive history of working within social justice movements, in her anticolonial feminism she joined forces with women newly politicized by postwar events. These included future ANCWL president Lilian Ngoyi, who joined the Congress during the Defiance campaign and was soon after arrested for entering the white section of a local post office. In another act of protest, Ngoyi boldly padded her stomach with antiapartheid pamphlets to appear pregnant, relying on gendered assumptions about women’s essential nature to pass security checkpoints with banned ANC literature.48 Ngoyi’s 1955 election to the ANC’s executive committee suggests an awareness among male leaders of women organizers’ important contributions to the antiapartheid movement. Whether newly politicized like Ngoyi or seasoned veterans like Mkhize, South African women and their American counterparts viewed their anticolonial activism as an opportunity to address the needs of their communities.

Similarities in the rhetoric used by pass law protesters in 1950 and by Sojourners a little over a year later are striking, as the Americans, too, made demands of their government based on their roles as nurturers and protectors. In the fall of 1951, Eslanda Goode Robeson answered the “Call to Negro Women” issued by leftist activists Beulah Richardson and Louise Thompson Patterson that announced their sojourn to Washington
and the founding of a militant black women’s organization. The “Call” was a response to a nationwide wave of postwar racial violence and well-publicized legal actions against African Americans from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s, including the U.S. Justice Department’s indictment of W. E. B. Du Bois as a “foreign agent” (presumably of the U.S.S.R.), and the State Department’s revocation of Paul Robeson’s passport, both due to their activism in leftist peace movements. In the same period, Louise Thompson Patterson’s husband, William, was prosecuted under the Smith Act as a Communist Party leader. These events inflamed Richardson and Patterson. As historian Linn Shapiro has noted, however, following their trip to Washington, Sojourners made the defense of a woman, Rosa Lee Ingram, the pillar of their feminist agenda, thereby tackling the intertwined issues of race and gender oppression.49

In 1947, Ingram was a recently widowed mother of twelve, eking out a living as tenant farmer in rural Georgia. When John Stratford, a white neighbor, assaulted her in the heat of an argument over farm animals grazing on Stratford’s land, two of Ingram’s sons interceded. Stratford was shot with the rifle he had wielded against the family. Ingram’s defense of her body and Stratford’s subsequent death disrupted a social order under which black women’s bodies were treated by many as the property of descendants of slave owners. In response, the police arrested not only Ingram, but also four of her sons, charging them with murder. In January 1948, an all-white jury convicted her and two sons, sentencing them to death. The case gained international attention, and at the time of their founding, the Sojourners considered Ingram’s resistance to Stratford a defense of the honor “of all womanhood” and “the first step in ending the indignities heaped upon Negro women everywhere in our land.”50 Like South African women who claimed passes had “reduced our husbands to slavery” and “caused our sons to fill the jails,” Sojourners drew attention to their family role. As wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, they claimed, “we have watched our husbands and fathers burned, quartered, hanged and electrocuted . . . seen our brothers beaten, shot, and stamped to death,” and “our sons rotting in prisons.”51 The charge that under Jim Crow their daughters had been “raped and degraded” echoed the concerns of South African women about protecting the virtue of black girls living under white supremacy. In both cases experience with sexual and racial violence made girls and women uniquely vulnerable.

These similarities reflect the fact that discussion of family and community provided anticolonial feminists a language to understand and then challenge their oppression in pursuit of, in the words of the STJ, “the completer emancipation of women throughout the world.” Like other black women before them, they created a strain of feminism that met their needs and the needs of their communities at a particular historical moment. Ula Taylor’s
study of Pan-African intellectual Amy Jacques Garvey offers insight into the tradition of black women confronting the brutal spread of white supremacy that resulted from global imperialism and the institutionalization of Jim Crow in an earlier period. Taylor argues that in the 1910s Jacques Garvey, second wife of Jamaican United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) founder Marcus Garvey, was able “to join feminism and nationalism in a single coherent, consistent framework” through her UNIA work. Indeed, Jacques Garvey set an example of “community feminism” by uniting the nationalist goal of self-determination with the feminist objective of strong women’s leadership in the community by acting as “helpmates” to their activist husbands. In the postwar era, anticolonial feminists did much the same. However, rather than emphasizing their roles as helpmates, in both the United States and South Africa they underscored the fact that white supremacy had forced them into leadership roles when black males were torn from family and community through racial violence and government persecution. In both countries, women’s concerns for black communities led them to strike a balance between feminism and nationalism. The STJ’s alarm about the establishment of South African apartheid illustrates how broadly anticolonialists defined their community.

Despite this tradition of African American women working to establish links between global liberation movements, their work against colonialism is often obscured by historians focused on male movement leadership. Nowhere is this more evident than in the postwar work of Sojourner Eslanda Goode Robeson, whose activism many historians have footnoted as they chronicled the impressive career of her husband. The first African American to work in the surgical pathology department at Columbia Presbyterian Medical center, Eslanda met Paul Robeson when he was admitted to the hospital with an injury. She later wrote frankly about her campaign to elicit a marriage proposal from the popular and charismatic Robeson. Writing in midlife, Eslanda’s assertion that during their courtship she was “short and thick, so I had to make myself — well, interesting” was, perhaps, an attempt to emphasize her intellectual contributions to her marriage and establish herself as a woman of substance. Following her marriage to Paul, Eslanda took the lead in exploring their African roots and in initiating their fight against imperialism. She also directed her husband’s early career, which included films, concert tours, and London and Broadway theater. She joined him in Europe when he found work in London, a move that changed her life. Eslanda wrote that it was there that she and Paul first confronted the discourse of imperialism because in London “the Colonial Question was always under discussion.” Anthropology classes at the London School of Economics led to a decision to pursue a post-graduate degree in anthropology and provided the opportunity to study the people of Africa.
Robeson’s tour of Africa proved an important source for a growing literary career. In *African Journey*, published in 1945, she poignantly wrote about the development of her race pride, suggesting it was when still quite young that she first thought, like many ethnic Americans, that she, too, wanted to visit “the old country.” She recounted how little she learned about Africa in her early education and lamented the effects of such ignorance on Americans’ understandings of colonial people. “I blush with shame for the mental picture my fellow Negroes in America have of our African brothers,” Robeson wrote, “wild black savages in leopard skins, waving spears and eating raw meat.”

Probably more significant to the U.S. government was Robeson’s observation that “this traveling about Africa reminds me of traveling through the Deep South in America.” Making such connections in a Cold War context no doubt unsettled U.S. policy makers, who viewed African liberation movements, with their potential to align with communism, as destabilizing to the balance of power between the United States and Soviet Union.

Travel through Africa also profoundly shaped Robeson’s activism, leading to her role in launching the most influential U.S. Pan-African organization since Marcus Garvey’s UNIA. The 1937 founding of the International Committee on African Affairs, later renamed the Council on African Affairs (CAA), was instrumental in keeping Pan-Africanism alive in the United States during the Popular Front era. The initiative for the Council came from Max Yergan, a black ex-secretary of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) who, after working in Africa, sought to educate the public about the continent and encourage its liberation. In recounting the successful creation of the CAA, Yergan explained that he approached prominent African Americans, most notably Paul Robeson, and white liberals for support in establishing the organization.

Omission of Eslanda Goode Robeson’s significant role in the founding of the CAA, the only U.S. antiapartheid organization in the postwar era, and in its later operations is emblematic of the marginalization of women in the historiography of anticolonial movements. Years after the event, Eslanda recounted how Yergan approached her at her home in London and explained his plan to found the Council, “which would inform Negroes in America (and other people everywhere) about the terrible conditions under which the African People live and work.” Having witnessed the effects of European colonialism on the lives of Africans, Eslanda wrote him a check, making her the Council’s first contributor. Eslanda claims it was through her support that her husband became interested in and eventually came to lead the CAA.

Examining the important role Eslanda played in the founding and operation of the CAA helps to connect a severed link between postwar nationalist and feminist movements. Eleven years after its founding, she was
pivotal in the CAA’s very public expulsion of Yergan following a heated battle over his leadership as executive director. Tension arose when Yergan, who at one time enjoyed strong ties to the Communist Party, began what one historian characterizes as “perhaps the most pronounced political about-face among African American activists and intellectuals of the Cold War era.”

Well-known fellow travelers Paul and Eslanda joined with the CAA’s Communist faction to fight what they saw as the director’s attempt to move the organization in a more conservative direction. Eslanda kept Paul, who was traveling at the time, apprised of events and sent a letter to CAA members charging Yergan with using the issue of communism to cover for his mismanagement in a variety of areas. In 1949, the Council named Louise Thompson Patterson, who would shortly thereafter help found the STJ, director of the CAA. Their activism in the Council made Robeson and Patterson key figures in linking feminist and anticolonial agendas in the Sojourners.

Recognizing commonalities in the discrimination black women in the United States and South Africa faced, a March 1952 resolution from the CAA board to the Sojourners impressively stated the case for pursuing an alliance, encouraging a transnational feminist link. Arguing that women had historically “demonstrated in numerous past struggles their great courage, resourcefulness and uncompromising zeal” as leaders of campaigns to improve African lives, the CAA enthusiastically pledged its support for the imminent Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws and for the ending of the oppression of black women the world over. The Sojourners issued resolutions based on CAA suggestions, including a proposal to send messages of support to the campaign’s female leaders. A short list of contacts included Bertha Mkhize, who had recently been arrested after leading an anti-pass law protest through the streets of Durban. It was this STJ resolution that produced the letter that “overjoyed” yet surprised Mkhize.

Mkhize’s response to the STJ letter, in which she wonders how African American women knew of the ANCWL’s work, suggests that many South African activists remained unaware of the efforts of the CAA and STJ to encourage an alliance between anti-Jim Crow and antiapartheid movements. Patterson, in her position as director of the CAA and national board member of the STJ, helps illustrate the crossover between the memberships of these organizations and their missions. Under her direction, the CAA used its journals to cover antiapartheid activism, helping to explain how African Americans kept abreast of developments in South Africa. While CAA journal coverage accounts for how some Americans knew about South African resistance to apartheid, the South African government’s ban of CAA literature answers questions about why ANC members might have been unaware of this support.
Other African American women, including Charlotta Bass, joined Patterson and Robeson as members of both the STJ and CAA. Bass’s unprecedented campaign as the Progressive Party’s vice presidential candidate in 1952 marked her own attempt to join nationalist and feminist agendas through political organizing. She viewed her activism as a vehicle for the advancement of not only black women but of a worldwide black community. While serving as the STJ president and running on the Progressive Party ticket, Bass explained: “Since we, the Negro people of the United States, are members of that great family of dark peoples of the world numbering into millions in India, China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaya, Africa, and other parts of the world, we naturally are concerned with the future destiny of our nation and these other nations, and our place in this atomic age.” Using the language of family and community, Bass once again emphasized the need for black women’s social and political activism. In her reference to nuclear weapons, however, she identified a new threat to African Americans in the postwar world.

Fear of this organized transnational community, determined to erase white supremacy from the globe, united the anticommunist governments of the United States and South Africa, which shared important Cold War interests. Long treated as “an undeveloped treasure house of natural wealth” by European colonizers, Africa’s mineral output during World War II had provided the Allies the resources to defeat fascism; following the war, the United States was determined the continent would supply the materials to defeat Soviet communism. Industrial diamonds, cobalt, gold, and uranium were all vital to the production of atomic and other weaponry, and with its abundant supplies, southern Africa appeared to offer a bulwark against the Soviets. Trade between the United States and the Union of South Africa expanded after the war, as U.S. investment in African industries increased. President Harry Truman and his advisors clearly recognized the significance of South Africa’s natural resources and joined with its brutally segregationist government to construct “a solid, if not iron, curtain of anticommunism” across the globe. The women of the STJ and the ANCWL sought to draw back that curtain.

In the summer of 1953, Robeson’s high-profile assaults on anticomunism landed her on the radar screen of “Tail-Gunner Joe” McCarthy. Decades of publishing books and articles about race earned her an appearance before the senator’s permanent Committee on Government Operations. Convinced that previous Democratic administrations had, in the words of one newspaper report, “loaded American overseas [military] libraries with books by Communist authors,” the committee was intent on identifying Communist Party members and ridding libraries of their subversive texts. McCarthy’s subpoena of Robeson demonstrates just how closely aligned
the issues of communism and racial liberation had become in the minds of anticommunists.

Despite Robeson’s prominence in debates surrounding the relationship between U.S. foreign and racial policy, it appears that gender stereotyping may have led McCarthy to expect a submissive witness. He was quickly disappointed. The books that concerned his committee included *African Journey*, which complimented Soviet, and criticized U.S., race policy.75 At the beginning of her Senate testimony, Robeson told the committee that despite her status as a “second-class citizen” due to her race, she remained a loyal American who believed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. She then refused to answer any questions concerning her own or her husband’s possible membership in the CPUSA. Perhaps the most significant of Robeson’s strategies that day was her assertion of not only her First and Fifth Amendment rights, positions taken by others testifying in anticommunist hearings, but also the Fifteenth Amendment protecting African Americans’ right to vote. She pointed out that McCarthy’s committee was entirely white because blacks in the South had been denied their voting rights. In doing so, Robeson exposed racism as a central tenet of U.S. anticommunism and self-determination as a guiding principle of anticolonial feminism.

Eslanda Goode Robeson’s FBI surveillance confirms that the U.S. government took a keen interest in her civil rights and anticolonial activism. Her organizational affiliations, speaking engagements, and radical writings were all duly noted in voluminous documentation that was, perhaps not surprisingly, mixed within her husband’s file. Characterizing the STJ as a “Communist inspired” group, one report on the Sojourn to Washington listed Eslanda as a member of the initiating committee and credited her with “inducing” women “to join the Sojourn.”76 In the spring of 1950, the agency noted the publication of *African Journey* and a pamphlet entitled “What Do the People of Africa Want?” Almost certainly aware of Robeson’s commitment to the extinction of white supremacy, McCarthy nonetheless appeared stunned by the confidence she displayed before his committee when discussing the topic. Unable to win the contest with his opponent, according to one report the senator dismissed Eslanda and “implied that his committee had given Mrs. Robeson special consideration because she had raised the race issue and because she was a woman.”77

By the mid-1950s, government harassment by McCarthy’s Senate committee, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and the FBI had taken a significant toll on political dissent in the United States. With passage of the Internal Security or McCarran Act of 1950, all organizations suspected of Communist ties were required to register with the Attorney General’s office or appear before a Subversive Activities Control Board. In rapid succession Popular Front groups disbanded. HUAC’s report on the
Congress of American Women, which promoted, among other issues, a black liberation agenda, illustrates the degree to which the U.S. government was determined to monitor and subvert leftist women’s transnational alliances.

Following the 1945 Paris International Women’s Conference at which women from across the globe created the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), American women announced in 1946 the birth of the Congress of American Women (CAW) and its intent to carry out WIDF goals to promote world peace and women’s equality. While most CAW members were not in the Communist Party, the Soviet government did back their parent organization, the WIDF. Thus, in 1949 HUAC investigated the CAW and released its Report on the Congress of American Women, which highlighted the group’s support of Soviet attacks on U.S. foreign policy. Fear of the possible harm Communist women and their supporters might cause in their campaign to “disarm and demobilize the United States and democratic nations generally” pervades the committee report. Among those members listed with “Communist Party or front connections” was Eslanda Goode Robeson, with her CAA affiliation noted to support the claim. Among those members listed with “Communist Party or front connections” was Eslanda Goode Robeson, with her CAA affiliation noted to support the claim. Robeson’s FBI report, too, included accounts of her trips overseas to attend WIDF conferences.

As it had earlier done with the CAW, the government monitored the STJ’s international ties from the group’s founding. Whereas early scrutiny of Sojourners focused on the group’s protests of the Ingram convictions, later FBI reports increasingly noted their peace and anticolonial activism. One of the top three “Aims and Objectives” of the Sojourners identified in a later report was the group’s challenge to the “colonial status” of blacks around the world. Under “Subversive Ramifications,” the report noted that CP organizers, who the government assumed were in control of the STJ, were “going to the women of the Party for the job of fighting for democracy since it is apparent that they have accomplished excellent results in China.” Fear that women had uniquely and successfully contributed to recent liberation movements clearly influenced the government’s analysis of the possible threat of the STJ.

Harassment of the CAW confirms the U.S. government’s concerns about leftist transnational women’s organizations and provided the FBI with a blueprint for dealing with such groups. Although it disaffiliated with the WIDF following publication of the House report in hopes of avoiding prosecution, the CAW was required to comply with the McCarran Act and register with the Justice Department as a foreign agent. Unwilling to do so, members chose to disband. By 1952 the Sojourners, too, had for all intents and purposes ceased to function, in part because its leaders were involved in other leftist causes that were under attack at the same time. Eslanda Goode Robeson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Louise Thompson Patterson were
each distracted by legal proceedings against their husbands.

Although FBI memoranda dated as early as mid-1953 claimed that
the STJ was inactive, in 1956 the Bureau attempted to lay the groundwork
to have the organization prosecuted under the Internal Security Act. Only
their inability to convince paid informants to testify kept the bureau from
moving forward with the case. While many of the women of the STJ,
including Robeson, would continue their radical activism, government
fears of the subversive nature of their critiques of U.S. Cold War policy now
limited their opportunities to publish and speak on the topic. In response,
Sojourner Shirley Graham Du Bois helped to found the leftist periodical
Freedomways, creating a forum for discussion and support of militant civil
rights and anticolonial movements—topics now considered too radical for
mainstream publications. Eslanda Goode Robeson was a frequent contribu-
tor to the magazine.

Across the Atlantic, African women faced similar obstacles to their
activism. The April 1954 founding of the Federation of South Africa Women
(FSAW) united members from such organizations as the South African
Indian Congress and Coloured People’s Organization in a cross-race um-
brella organization working closely with the ANC; ANCWL members were
given automatic membership in the Federation. FSAW’s mission was to
develop a program that would “bring about the emancipation of women
from the special disabilities suffered from them under laws . . . based on
complete equality and friendship between men and women.” Bertha
Mkhize attended the founding meeting in Johannesburg as an ANCWL
representative. Other participants included Dora Tamana, Lilian Ngoyi,
and Florence Matomela, as for a brief period women broke new ground in
the antiapartheid movement.

In 1955, the ANC expressed its growing militancy by taking the lead
in writing the Freedom Charter, a declaration of equality issued in alliance
with leading progressive organizations. The Charter’s call for a redistribu-
tion of national wealth coupled with its pledge to fight for political
rights “side by side, throughout our lives, until we have won our liberty,”
understandably alarmed the South African government. It responded by
arresting ANC leaders and conducting a Treason Trial that lasted more than
four years. Mkhize, Ngoyi, and Matomela were among the 156 activists
arrested and charged with “high treason.” Their experiences suggest that
for some postwar women the rival of anticolonial feminism was not male-
dominated nationalism but rather anticommunist politics.

In December 1956, the government flew Mkhize and several other
ANCWL leaders to Johannesburg where her case was tried. Despite tape
recordings played by the prosecution of her speaking at Durban meetings,
recordings that Mkhize was astounded to hear, she was found not guilty
and released in July 1957. A little more than six months later, however, police again detained her in a second round of arrests, which she recalled included more ANC women than the first round. Released this time without a trial, Mkhize drifted away from her political activism and joined the Bahá’í Faith.\(^86\) Forced out of Durban a decade earlier by apartheid law and now resettled in Inanda, Mkhize apparently had come to believe that the realization of racial and gender equality required divine intervention.\(^87\)

The contributions of STJ and ANCWL leaders in laying the groundwork for linking local, national, and international peace and racial liberation networks, and their skill at promoting feminist goals within these networks, have remained largely hidden from Cold War, civil rights, and even women’s historians focused on establishing the long-term effects of government oppression on the U.S. freedom movement. Recent studies, in fact, confirm that political repression greatly encumbered U.S. postwar Left feminism as well.\(^88\) Thus, an examination of women’s anticolonial activism that expands the focus beyond long-cited tensions between black liberation and feminist agendas to include a consideration of the external pressures exerted by Cold War governments offers a more comprehensive understanding of postwar history, at the same time contributing to a gendered analysis of diaspora studies. Further research of women’s activism in decolonization movements will undoubtedly lead to a still fuller assessment of the impact of the Cold War on both transnational feminism and black liberation movements, arguably the most significant global movements of the twentieth century.

Notes

1"A Call to Negro Women,” n.d., Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, folder 13, box 3, Robert Woodruff Collection, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, hereafter Patterson Papers.

2The Department of War was renamed the Department of Defense in 1949.

3"Digest of Proceedings,” Sojourn for Truth and Justice, folder 4, box 12, Patterson Papers.


5Charlotta Bass and Louise Thompson Patterson to Minna T. Soga, 5 April 1952, folder 4, box 13, Patterson Papers.

6Ellen DuBois and Amy Swerdlow explain that postwar Left-feminism recognized that the oppression of women was a product of the same power structures that produced racism and classism. See Swerdlow, “The Congress of American Women: Left-Feminist Peace Politics in the Cold War,” in *U.S. History as Women’s*

“Bertha Mkhize to Dear Friends,” 10 April 1952, folder 4, box 13, Patterson Papers.


Although the significance of gender is not entirely ignored in the following literature, a sustained analysis of how it may have influenced leftist activism has yet to be written: Brenda Gayle Plummer, Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Thomas Borstelmann, The...


14As Cherryl Walker points out, “For the entire period of the 1940s, material on the ANCWFL is very thin.” The same can be said for the 1950s; historians are, therefore, left to rely on limited newspaper coverage of the League’s activism and recollections of its members. See Walker, Women and Resistance, 91.


16Following the Left-liberal split in the late 1940s and early 1950s, liberal women were more likely to work within the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) than leftist groups like the Council on African Affairs. Penny von Eschen has explained that the ACOA “typified the new Anti-Communist anticolonialism” with an agenda “avowedly committed to stopping the spread of Communism in Africa.” See von Eschen, Race Against Empire, 143.

17The South African racial hierarchy in the mid-twentieth century included: “whites,” most often Afrikaner or English; “blacks,” whose ancestors were indigenous to southern Africa; “Indians,” whose ancestors from the Indian subcontinent provided a cheap labor pool; and “colored,” those of mixed white, African, and Malay ancestry.

18Bertha Mkhize, interview by D. Collins and A. Manson, 14 August 1979, interview KCAV 147 transcript, Killie Campbell Library, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, hereafter Mkhize, KCAV 147 transcript.


21Anticolonial feminists like Mkhize provide proof that long before theories of intersectionality entered academic discourse, feminists challenged through their activism intersecting systems of oppression. On the theory of intersectionality, see


23Passes were in essence identification papers, which workers were required to carry at all times.


27Ibid., 72.

28In 1948, the National Party, the party of Dutch Afrikaners, successfully capitalized on resentment over their country’s support of imperial Great Britain in World War II, winning national elections. Led by Daniel Malan, the party established an exclusively Afrikaner government from 1948 to 1954, which implemented racial apartheid.


31Mkhize, KCAV 354 transcript.


33McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven,’” 112, emphasis in the original.

34These practices included “spoiling” passes, sabotaging blacks’ efforts to leave the employment of abusive white business owners by entering inaccurate information about them on their passes. Bertha Mkhize, interview by D. Collins and A. Manson, 22 August 1979, interview KCAV 151 transcript, Killie Campbell Library, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, herafter Mkhize, KCAV 151 transcript.


38 The ANC was initially named the South African Native National Congress.


43 Ibid., 6.

44 Mkhize, KCAV 151 transcript.


46 Shireem Hassim argues that an analysis of African women’s activism requires questioning how successfully women “could build autonomous organizations that retained the capacity for the self-definition of goals and strategies while nevertheless building alliances with other progressive forces”; see *Women’s Organizations and Democracy in South Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 19.

47 Mkhize, KCAV 151 transcript.


50 In all probability, Stratford did not rape Ingram. However, this was not the common perception in the African American community. Sojourners invoked the language used by postwar African American women that, in the terms of Danielle...

51“A Call to Negro Women,” folder 3, box 13, Patterson Papers.

52Unlike the Sojourners, UNIA black nationalism supported a “Back to Africa” movement, proposing that only territorial separatism would guarantee black equality.

53Taylor, The Veiled Garvey, 87.

54See Plummer, Rising Wind; von Eschen, Race Against Empire; Borstelman, Cold War Color Line; Meriwether, Proudly We Can Be; and Nesbitt, Race for Sanctions.


57Eslanda Goode Robeson, unpublished article, “The Not So Strange Case of Paul Robeson,” folder Paul and Eslanda Robeson, box 8, Baldwin Papers, Special Collections, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, hereafter Baldwin Papers.

58Robeson, African Journey, 48. Following her trip to Africa, Eslanda Goode Robeson vowed to more carefully consider the film and stage roles that her husband accepted, noting, as some critics had, that they did not always represent Africans in the best light. See Duberman, Paul Robeson, 203–4.


61On the CAA’s status as an “antiapartheid” organization, see Nesbitt, Race for Sanctions, 2.

Hollis R. Lynch footnotes Eslanda Goode Robeson’s early involvement in the CAA, writing that she had met Yergan in South Africa in 1936. Her role as the CAA’s earliest financial supporter and the person to bring her husband Paul into the organization are omitted. See Black American Radicals, 57n10.

The bitter break between liberal and leftist elements in the CAA marked the beginning of the end of the organization. In 1950, the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) used provisions in the Internal Security Act of 1950 to force the CAA to register with the U.S. government as a Communist-front organization. The government built its case with input from Max Yergan, who “vindictively set out to destroy the Council.” See Lynch, Black American Radicals, 20, 50–52.


“Resolution from the Council on African Affairs to the Conference of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice,” 23 March 1952, folder 4, box 13, Patterson Papers.


Nesbitt, Race for Sanctions, viii.


Borstelmann, Apartheid’s Reluctant Uncle, 10.

Ibid., 10–25.

Ibid., 6, 46.


Shaffer, “Political Writings,” 52.


Ibid., 5.


Letter to Director, 31 May 1956, and Assistant Attorney General William F. Tompkins to Director, FBI, 6 June 1956, STJ FBI file.

Meli, A History of the ANC, 131.

M. Bahati Kuumba argues that “The momentum of the FSAW anti-pass campaign changed the political environment so that the established national liberation organizations, the ANC and the Congress Alliance then took up the anti-pass cause.” See “‘You’ve Struck a Rock’: Comparing Gender, Social Movements, and Transformation in the United States and South Africa,” Gender and Society 16, no. 4 (2002): 512.

Meli, A History of the ANC, 125–27.

Mkhize, KCAV 151 transcript. The year 1956 was pivotal for protest in South Africa. Following the distribution of the first pass books to women, “localized and sporadic” protests led in the early 1950s by women like Bertha Mkhize erupted in 1956 into a well-documented march by 20,000 women on the capital of Pretoria. It took the government two years to put down the anti-pass campaign. See Walker, Women and Resistance, 131.
