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Confronting apartheid

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Eslanda Goode Robeson was thinking about South Africa. It was March 1952, and the noted journalist, anthropologist, and activist was writing to Black newspaper editors about the forthcoming April 6 mass meetings called to protest the introduction of new apartheid laws by the country’s white Afrikaner government. Organized by the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the day of action represented a landmark moment in the nascent anti-apartheid struggle, marking a shift to nonviolent mass civil disobedience and inaugurating the Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws, which over the following months, would result in more than 8000 arrests.

In her letter to the Black press, Eslanda commented, “It seems to me that we here in America should not only read about and be thrilled by the heroism of our brothers and sisters in South Africa, but should DO something about it, too.” She implored African Americans to write messages of support to the leaders of the Defiance Campaign and called for “Negro churches and Negro communities throughout the country [to] observe two minutes of silence at the stroke of noon on Sunday, April 6, in commemoration and support of the desperate struggle of our South African brothers and sisters.” Finally, while noting the need for a similar protest movement in the United States, she asserted:

Here is a splendid opportunity, I think, for the Negro people to act together on a simple, common objective and strike a telling blow against Jim-Crow and for the rights of black people at home and abroad.¹

Eslanda Robeson’s insistence that the struggle against apartheid and Jim Crow were interconnected had deep roots. Her Black international consciousness was informed by encounters and networks that she had forged on the African continent.² She first visited South Africa in 1936, meeting ANC leaders and attending the All-African National Convention in Bloemfontein, held as a response to the prospect of new segregation laws.³ Indeed, it was on this trip that Eslanda met Max Yergan, an African American missionary and activist living in South Africa, whom she then worked with the following year in London to help set up the International Committee on African Affairs (ICAA).⁴ The ICAA ultimately migrated to New York and morphed into the...
radical anti-imperialist lobby the Council on African Affairs (CAA), which for most of its existence was chaired by Eslanda’s husband—the famous actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson.5

Eslanda remained a staunch critic of the apartheid state up until her death in 1965. She worked as a correspondent and editorial consultant for the leftist newspaper the New World Review and wrote prolifically on anti-colonial movements in the African American press (Ransby, 2013, 206).6 Significantly, her writing regularly focused on the lives and activism of women, emphasizing the gender dynamics of colonialism and white supremacy that placed them at the center of the global struggle for Black liberation. Indeed, when asked by an interviewer about her thoughts on the “African woman” in the early 1960s, she insisted that women were at the forefront of freedom movements in Africa, returning to South Africa to note that during the protests of the 1950s, women “offered resistance everywhere,” stating:

In fact, the women of Africa have always taken an active part in protests and demonstrations for independence, and against repression. They have come out, with their children, some of them with babies on their backs, to join the men in protest.7

Eslanda’s engagements with South Africa were shaped by the thoughts, actions, and collective fate of women who confronted segregation and apartheid. As the historian Erik McDuffie has argued, Eslanda and her radical comrades forged a “black women’s international,” a gendered articulation of Black internationalism insisting that the interrelated struggles against racism, sexism, and economic inequality placed women at the vanguard of the global struggle for Black liberation.8

This chapter demonstrates how Black women, working in and in-between the United States and South Africa, played an important role in the development of the global anti-apartheid movement in the 1950s. Focusing on the activism of Robeson, Frieda Matthews, and the Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ), it traces how radical Black women insisted that the fate of both nations were bound up with one another. These individuals defied the power of the state in order to travel, foster personal relationships, write, and organize against race, gender, and class exploitation in both countries.9 Shedding light on the “gendered contours of Black internationalism,” they drew inspiration from one another’s struggles, engaging in transnational exchanges that challenged race and gender oppression.10

“The other U.S.A.”

It’s hard to separate white supremacist histories of the United States and South Africa.11 State racisms are produced in exchange, and both countries have played a central role in shaping the transnational politics of white domination.12 Speaking in New York City in 1949, the South African ambassador to the United States reflected on these shared histories of settler colonialism and racist oppression. Referring to the Union of South Africa as “the other U.S.A.,” Harry T. Andrews stated in front of his predominantly white audience:

We are indeed both pioneering peoples, and the problems, experiences and perils of the early settlement of our forefathers in what were then uncivilized lands, among wild and warlike savages, were very similar in their nature. Perhaps in that very fact lies the fundamental reason why Americans and South Africans have so many characteristics in common, and why the South African way of life is today so comparable in so many respects to your own American way of life.13
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African Americans and Black South Africans were all too aware of these racist connections. Encountering one another through religious missionary work, educational institutions, Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), international Communism, trade unions, and other networks throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people of African descent identified the United States and South Africa as a key nexus of what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to as the global “color line.” The racial politics of both nations became even more tightly bound together following the election of the National Party in 1948 and the subsequent establishment of the apartheid state. Coinciding with the advance of the civil rights movement in the United States, the era of decolonization, and the escalation of the Cold War, it became virtually impossible to think about the Black liberation struggle in either country through a solely national lens.

The late 1940s and 1950s ushered in a new era of activism in South Africa. Following the rise to power of the National Party, the ANC moved towards a political strategy of mass-action. Galvanized by the militancy of events such as the 1946 African Mine Workers Strike, members of the ANC’s Youth League (ANC-YL) established a Programme of Action in 1949 that committed the organization to a strategy of active boycott, strikes, and civil disobedience. This political shift culminated in the 1952 Defiance Campaign, which saw the ANC and SAIC resist the introduction of apartheid laws that made the residential separation of racial groups compulsory, placed severe restrictions on the right to protest, and insisted that Africans belonged in “tribal reserves.” The acts of civil disobedience that followed in 1952 would reverberate around the world, especially in the United States, as African Americans watched and were inspired by this large-scale challenge to white supremacist rule.

Women were at the forefront of these protests, often spending weeks in prison after breaking pass laws and entering “whites only” spaces. Despite a long and varied history of women’s activism in South Africa, it wasn’t until 1943 that African women were permitted to become full members of the ANC. The ANC Women’s League (ANC-WL) was formally established at this time, eventually expanding to develop regional chapters and engaging in the politics of non-violent resistance. Later, in 1954, a multiracial national organization, the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), was founded.

[t]o bring the women of South Africa together, to secure full equality of opportunity for all women, regardless of race, colour or creed: to remove social and legal and economic disabilities; to work for the protection of the women and children of our land.

Working across the ANC-WL and FSAW, African women such as Ida Mtwana, Bertha Mkhize, Lilian Ngoyi, Dora Tamana, and Florence Matomela confronted white settler rule – repeatedly exposing apartheid as a gendered system of racial control. As Mtwana asserted in her address to FSAW’s inaugural conference in 1954:

Gone are the days when the place of women was in the kitchen and looking after the children. Today women are marching side by side with the men on the road to freedom. They are beginning to break the chains which have been created by the oppressors to retard the progress of women. Today we have come together to build up one big family.

Central to this political mobilization was the National Party’s 1952 announcement that African women would soon be required to carry passes. After challenges to earlier efforts to extend the pass laws (which had long applied to African men), this renewed effort to control women’s movement and labor was met with fierce resistance. In October 1955, a crowd of 2000
demonstrated outside the Union buildings in Pretoria against the new laws. The following year, on August 9, over 20,000 women returned to Pretoria – standing in silence outside the government buildings for 30 minutes after delivering a petition to the prime minister’s office. The anti-pass protests continued throughout the 1950s, long after the Defiance Campaign had fizzled out, as women set the agenda for the liberation struggle during the decade. Working through FSAW, the ANC-WL, and the broader Congress Alliance, African women organized demonstrations, ran campaigns, went to jail, held conferences, published materials, and forged international connections as they targeted race, gender, and class oppression in apartheid South Africa.23

Transatlantic connections: Frieda Matthews and the Sojourners for Truth and Justice

Frieda Bokwe Matthews arrived in New York City in September 1952 as the Defiance Campaign was in full swing. She had ostensibly made this transatlantic journey to join her husband Z.K. Matthews, a renowned Fort Hare professor and president of the Cape branch of the ANC, who had taken up a visiting position at the Union Theological Seminary. However, as the racial situation in South Africa made headlines around the world, Frieda seized upon the politically opportune timing of her trip to become a key overseas spokesperson for the anti-apartheid movement. As Z.K. recalled in his autobiography,

People – especially the Negro sections of the community – were anxious to know what was happening … the word apartheid was being bandied about and people wanted to know what it meant, and what its implications were for the black folks of South Africa.24

Faced with a captive audience eager to learn about the explosive political situation back home, Frieda and her husband made a significant contribution to increasing awareness of and support for the anti-apartheid movement overseas.

A talented writer and musician, Frieda Matthews was an outspoken critic of South African racism, particularly in relation to the issue of “Bantu” education.25 She traveled widely and in 1935 moved to London with Z.K. while he studied at the LSE, meeting anti-colonial activists including Jomo Kenyatta as well as Eslanda and Paul Robeson.26 The following year, they hosted Eslanda and her son Paul Jr. at their home in Alice in the Eastern Cape. The visit coincided with the marriage of Frieda’s brother Rosebery Bokwe, a physician who had also been an acquaintance of the Robesons in Britain. Reflecting on this time, she commented:

The fortnight they spent with us was exciting as Mrs. Robeson was a brilliant conversationalist, and our house was inundated with visitors curious to see the wife of the great baritone of whom all Black people were proud, and to discuss with her “the problems of our people here in Africa and America.”

(Matthews, 1995, 24, 27–28)

Frieda would develop these Black international conversations in the United States years later. While initially apprehensive about leaving South Africa at such an explosive time, she embraced the opportunity to challenge apartheid on the international stage. The Matthews were inundated with invitations to address the political situation in South Africa, with Frieda being as much in demand as her husband, speaking at meetings “at least four times a week” (Matthews, 1995, 50; Matthews, 1981, 160). Frieda and Z.K. also engaged in lobbying work for ANC in the United States, collaborating with diverse groups interested in African affairs, such as the
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Americans for South African Resistance (AFSAR), and the CAA.27

Their activities provoked the ire of the National Party while also arousing the suspicions of the FBI.28 Commenting on her advocacy on behalf of the Defiance Campaign, Frieda noted, “Little did we realise that our government was keeping a close watch on us,” adding defiantly, “Not that this knowledge would have made any difference to what we told our audiences” (Matthews, 1995, 51). The South African government refused to issue the couple passports so they could extend their visit, while on their return home they were met at the airport by the police, who subjected them to humiliating searches and confiscated their private documents before launching an official investigation into their activities abroad.29

Significantly, Frieda Matthews’ time in the United States also coincided with the emergence of a short-lived but pioneering African American women’s organization – the Harlem-based STJ. Founded in September 1951, the Sojourners were a who’s who of progressive Black women, including Eslanda Robeson, Louise Thompson Patterson, Beulah Richardson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Claudia Jones, Dorothy Hunton, Charlotta Bas, and Alice Childress.30 Noting the gender and class politics of Jim Crow, the STJ insisted that “Negro Women, whose physical and economic security are always threatened by UnAmerican practices and violence … are especially fitted to challenge our Government, and to point out that DEMOCRACY BEGINS AT HOME.”31

The Sojourners not only argued that these interlocking oppressions meant that African American women were at the center of the struggle against white supremacy in the United States but also stressed the need for a global analysis of racism and a clear commitment to the anti-colonial struggle. While the STJ was already fragmenting due to the repressive politics of the Second Red Scare as Frieda arrived in the United States, her visit coincided with the organization’s efforts to forge links with anti-apartheid activists (McDuffie, 2011, 182). Working in tandem with the CAA, the Sojourner leadership wrote to Black South African women, including Mina T. Soga of the National Council of African Women (NCAW) and Bertha Mkhize of the ANC-WL, stressing the need for solidarity between women of color in Asia, Africa, and the United States, while also insisting on the need for “complete emancipation of women throughout the world” (Castledine, 2008, 58; McDuffie, 2012, 16–18).

At the same time, Louise Thompson Patterson and Charlotta Bass contacted Ray Alexander, a white South African Communist Party and labor organizer who would later play a key role in the founding of FSAW, noting that:

We have been inspired by the example of militant action on the part of African women. We realize that our fight for freedom in the United States is inextricably linked to the struggle against the tyranny of the white supremacists not only in South Africa but throughout the entire Continent.

(McDuffie, 2012, 17)

The refusal of Black South African women to accept apartheid laws, to surrender control of their mobility, employment, bodies, and families to the white settler state, clearly resonated with the Sojourners. While it is unclear whether Frieda Matthews had any direct dealings with the group, her visibility in the United States during the Defiance Campaign would have undoubtedly reinforced these links, further establishing apartheid and Jim Crow as interrelated systems of racial control, while also providing a visible reminder of the centrality of Black women in the struggle against colonialism and white supremacy in Africa.
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Disrupting Black international solidarities

The state-sponsored hounding of the Matthews and the Sojourners is testament to the radical potential of these connections. Concerned about negative publicity and fearful of jeopardizing what was a mutually profitable political, economic, and strategic Cold War relationship, both the U.S. and South African governments deployed the language of anti-communism to try to marginalize dissenting Black voices and bolster white supremacist power.\(^{32}\) Indeed, the apparent lack of engagement of African American women with FSAW upon its founding in 1954 was a direct consequence of this harassment.

FSAW had a global outlook, working with the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) to forge transnational solidarities with women overseas. Made up of affiliate organizations in over 60 countries, the WIDF was a progressive feminist and anti-colonial organization committed to fighting for women’s rights.\(^{33}\) FSAW’s desire to challenge racism and sexism internationally was most vividly demonstrated by their decision to send Lilian Ngoyi and Dora Tamana to the WIDF’s World Congress of Mothers held in Lausanne, Switzerland in July 1955 (Healy-Clancy, 2017, 856–60).\(^{34}\) Ngoyi and Tamana’s travels were both audacious and illegal. In attempting to escape the country, both women tried to stow away, under “white names,” on a boat leaving Cape Town, defied segregated seating on a plane bound for London with the help of a sympathetic pilot, and finally gained entry to Britain – before traveling to Switzerland – under the pretense that they were enrolled in a bible studies course.\(^{35}\) At Lausanne, Ngoyi presided over the second session of the conference, giving its opening address, while Tamana stood in front of assembled women and mothers from almost every continent and declared: “The Federation of South African Women … has joined hands with all organisations fighting for democratic rights, for full equality, irrespective of race or sex.”\(^{36}\)

Ngoyi and Tamana were two of 1063 delegates who attended the World Congress of Mothers. Participants from 66 countries made the journey, united in their insistence on women’s rights and readiness to agitate for democracy and peace in the second half of the twentieth century. African American women, however, were not involved in these discussions. In fact, there is no evidence that any delegates from the United States attended the gathering. Key members of the Sojourners had been in the WIDF’s orbit, with Eslanda Robeson attending the federation’s 1949 Moscow conference and subsequently becoming a member of the organization’s U.S. affiliate, the Congress of American Women (CAW) (Ransby, 2013, 197–98). The Sojourners’ efforts to engage with Black South African women had also brought them into direct contact with FSAW leaders. It is therefore not difficult to imagine an alternative history where progressive African American activists were among the delegates who heard Ngoyi and Tamana condemn apartheid in Lausanne. However, by the time of this gathering, the Sojourners had been defunct for two years, while the CAW had been declared a subversive organization in the United States, and the WIDF had lost its official consultative status at the United Nations in 1954 at the behest of the American delegation.

Individual Sojourners were also persecuted. Eslanda Robeson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Charlotta Bass were all refused passports by the State Department, which had concluded that their travel abroad would “not [be] in the best interests of the United States.” Claudia Jones, meanwhile, was prosecuted under the Smith Act, imprisoned, and eventually deported from the United States in 1955.\(^{37}\) The National Party also fervently embraced anti-communism, using the threat of “foreign subversion” to limit opportunities to protest and placing 156 activists – including Mkhize and Ngoyi – on trial for treason in 1956. State repression and harassment therefore severely limited the opportunity for African American and South African women to engage in transnational exchanges and develop Black international solidarities.
Conclusion

The 1950s were a transformative moment in the struggle against white supremacy in South Africa. While unsuccessful in their immediate aim to overturn new discriminatory laws, the mass protests and civil disobedience campaigns of this era produced strategies, alliances, and landmark events that would continue to resonate during the long struggle against apartheid. It is impossible to account for the scale, militancy, and vibrancy of these protests without acknowledging the role of women. Furthermore, the staunch refusal of African women to accept passes and their opposition to apartheid more broadly inspired likeminded activists around the world.

Indeed, these acts of resistance clearly resonated with African American women in the United States. Eslanda Robeson, STJ, and Frieda Matthews all had a deep-seated belief that they could learn from one another’s struggles. Engaging with one another’s struggles across national borders, they challenged state efforts to contain their activism by insisting on the need for a global response to institutionalized white supremacy.

Centering the experiences and contributions of women sheds light on how broad and multifaceted the global anti-apartheid movement really was. Through their travels, exchanges, and organizing efforts, these activists defied the repressive power of the state to play a vital role in fostering international opposition to apartheid. They made sure that African women were visible on the international stage and in the process, challenged Black activists to expand their political vision beyond the boundaries of the nation and to foster a global community committed to eradicating race and gender oppression.

Notes

4 Jacqueline Castledine, “‘In a Solid Bond of Unity’: Anticolonial Feminism in the Cold War Era,” Journal of Women’s History 20, no. 4 (2008), 68–9.


31 “Call to Negro Women,” 1951, EGRP, Box. 13.

33 Francisa de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organisations: The Case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF),” *Women’s History Review* 19, no. 4 (September 1, 2010): 547–73.


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