Introduction
Given the global circulation of the image, legend, and legacy of Abraham Lincoln as a consummate symbol of American democracy and freedom, it should come as no surprise that from the middle of the twentieth century until the early 1960s, as Africans fought for national independence from colonial subjugation, young African nationalists would find inspiration in Lincoln’s life for their aspirations for self-determination. A more direct historical link between Lincoln and Africa is that, ironically, Lincoln supported the voluntary colonization, or resettlement, of emancipated blacks to Africa. He was hardly unique in this regard, sharing the widespread belief that whites would never accept blacks as equals in the United States. Throughout the antebellum era, colonization to Africa remained a far more popular, and ambiguous, form of opposition to slavery than the more radical position of abolitionism. Colonizationists encompassed pro-slavery politicians as well as anti-slavery Republicans, including Harriet Beecher Stowe. Like Stowe, many viewed the resettlement of African Americans to their ancestral homeland in largely religious terms. Colonization, in their view, promised redemption from the horrors of slavery, as former slaves enacted divine providence through the evangelization of Africa. With this objective in mind, Presbyterians established what became Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, renamed in honor of the fallen emancipator, for the purpose of training Africans and African Americans to spread the gospel in Africa. In 1957, Lincoln University’s most illustrious African graduate, Kwame Nkrumah, presided over the independence of the West African nation of Ghana as its first Prime Minister. Nkrumah pursued an ambitious agenda of African continental union and liberation that brought him both worldwide fame and notoriety, while engaging quite substantively with the meaning of Lincoln’s legacy, and its implications for his nation, and Africa. As perhaps the crowning irony in this story of historical affinities between Africa and America, Nkrumah and Lincoln were again linked in 2009, the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth and the centennial of Nkrumah’s.

While the record of commentary about Lincoln among educated, English-speaking Africans is far from voluminous, there is enough of it to raise several intriguing questions. How did Africans obtain information about Lincoln? What did Lincoln’s image mean to them?
And finally, why was this fascination with Lincoln among an admittedly select group of African leaders so fleeting?

To fully understand Africans’ fascination with Lincoln, it’s helpful to note the complexity of African Americans’ views of Lincoln. In his oration at the Freedmen’s dedication of the monument to Abraham Lincoln in Washington D.C. in 1876, Frederick Douglass made the classic statement of African Americans’ ambivalence toward Lincoln. Compelled by the occasion to speak unvarnished truth, Douglass noted that Lincoln had been “the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men,” ready, at least in the early years of his administration, to sacrifice the human rights of blacks in order to uphold the welfare of whites.

“You and yours were the objects of his deepest affection and his most earnest solicitude. You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity.” Still, Douglass allowed that although “the Union was more to him than our freedom or our future, under his wise and beneficent rule we saw ourselves gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood.” Lincoln had been no abolitionist, but his moderation helped assure the demise of slavery. “Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.”

Little wonder that Lincoln provided the contested terrain upon which blacks would continue to debate the meaning of their existence in the United States. Fond memories of Lincoln the emancipator clashed with the unsentimental view of Lincoln the pragmatist, susceptible to the prejudices of his era, and the subject of Lincoln could elicit sharp tensions between integrationists and nationalists, radicals and conservatives, at times in explosive fashion. In 1933, Arthur Schomburg, the Afro-Puerto Rican scholar and collector of all manner of books, manuscripts, prints, and paintings by or related to people of African descent, bolted angrily from a Brooklyn meeting at which he was guest speaker. The chair of the meeting, the black journalist Ted Poston, had disputed Schomburg’s claim that Lincoln was a man without prejudice. Poston countered that if left up to Lincoln, African Americans would still be slaves, a statement that infuriated Schomburg.

However disputed his legacy, African Americans have enlisted Lincoln’s image to mobilize ideological support for their own freedom struggles. Historian Scott Sandage identifies the 1939 concert by Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial as setting the tone for the civil rights movement’s strategies of nonviolent protest. Black activists, Sandage argues, “refined a politics of memory at the Lincoln Memorial,” promulgating a civic religion of national unity and consensus to help amplify the voices of blacks and legitimate the cause of civil rights in national politics. Noting the “ambivalent relationship between African Americans and the icon called Abraham Lincoln,” Sandage notes that black civil rights leaders “strategically appropriated Lincoln’s memory and monument as political weapons, in the process layering and changing the public meanings of the hero and his shrine.”

Though Africans may not have engaged Abraham Lincoln’s image and memory as extensively and with as conflicted feelings as did African Americans, nevertheless, a process of appropriation comparable to that described by Sandage seems to be at work. Just as the struggle for equality shaped African American appropriations of Lincoln, Africans similarly viewed Lincoln as a resource in their opposition to European colonialism from the mid-1880s to the 1960s. The references in the historical record that I have been able to locate suggest Lincoln’s appeal as a symbol of freedom. In Africa, as throughout the rest of the world, Lincoln has proven to be a most malleable icon.
How did English-speaking Africans, by and large, learn about Lincoln? Most likely, Africans received knowledge of Lincoln in two ways. One probable path to such knowledge was through the cultural influence of American, African American, and British missionary educators in West, Central, and Southern Africa, from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth. During the late nineteenth century, the travels of African American seamen to Cape Town, one of the busiest port cities in Africa, provided another source of knowledge about Lincoln. In addition, African American jubilee vocal quartets toured internationally, and during the late nineteenth century, such groups performed in every major city in South Africa. According to historian James Campbell, these pathways of communication provided a wide range of Africans, whether educated or not, a basic familiarity with African American history and its central narrative of slavery and emancipation. Such knowledge would have provided a sturdy foundation for the turn of the century collaboration between black South African ministers and African American missionaries of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.5

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, another source of knowledge about Lincoln came from African American colleges such as Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, which also enrolled students from the African continent, with the purpose of training them for missionary efforts back home. These American-educated Africans would have been important additional sources of information about the reform movement of emancipation and freedman’s education, within which Lincoln’s image would have loomed large, particularly as part of Emancipation day celebrations among blacks for generations after his death. Indeed, during the early twentieth century there is evidence that American and African American missionaries invoked the memory of Lincoln to generate ideological and material support for African missionary work. It should be noted here that American missionaries, black or white, were invariably trespassers in a field that European missionaries and colonial authorities viewed as their proprietary domain. By the late nineteenth century, when the white South’s campaign to reverse the civil and political rights gained by African Americans under Reconstruction was in full swing, many African American missionaries in Africa were at pains to defend their fitness for citizenship and equality by asserting their unique contribution to the uplift and redemption of Africa. Invoking Lincoln in their promotional literature also may have been an attempt to resuscitate the flagging spirit of abolitionism and evangelical reform. Lincoln was introduced into the promotional discourse by missionaries of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African American National Baptist Convention (NBC), and the predominantly white American Baptist Home Mission Society, raising the possibility that stories about Lincoln would have entered the curriculum of these missionary schools.6

One source of information for English-speaking Africans of the independence era may have been a series of religious tracts published during the 1940s by London’s Sheldon Press on behalf of the International Committee on Christian Literature for Africa, also based in London. The series, the African Home Library, featured brief biographies of such figures as “Harriet Tubman: Who Led the Slaves to Freedom,” William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury, and Abraham Lincoln. Selections in the African Home Library were not confined to the theme of slavery and abolition, as suggested by the abovementioned works. These lives of Tubman, Wilberforce and Lincoln were listed alongside books adapted from Old and New Testament stories and the like. Mrs. George Schwab, an American writer listed as the author of the life of Lincoln, hewed closely to the familiar myths about her subject, including his aptitude for physical labor, his youthful hunger for education, his honesty and kindness, and above all, his opposition to slavery, which, along with the matter of Lincoln’s piety, was substantially overstated. The Gettysburg Address was reprinted in Schwab’s book. The lesson Schwab drew from Lincoln’s assassination was the peaceful succession of power, indicating
the strength of a “government of the people and for the people.” More research is needed to
discern whether books from the African Home Library were circulated in Africa, and if so, to
what locations. Interestingly, with the permission of the International Committee on Chris-
tian Literature for Africa and the Sheldon Press, a Mende language version of the Schwab
text was published in the West African British colony of Sierra Leone in 1955.7

If the purveyors of such tracts in English, Mende, or any other African languages intended
to secure the allegiance of Africans to the colonial status quo, theirs was a risky approach.
Indeed, great men and women in the British and American histories of abolition and eman-
cipation would likely be irresistible objects of study for young English-speaking colonial
subjects striving for self-respect and political independence. The historian Derek Peterson
wrote of a rhetoric of abolitionism in the writings of Kenyans imprisoned by the British, as a
means of exposing and condemning the abuses of colonial authorities. By associating their
plight with slavery, detainees also asserted themselves as the true exemplars and guardians of
what they considered to be British standards of justice and civilization.8

Though fragmentary, this historical background suggests that it would not be entirely
unexpected that Africans would reference Lincoln or quote from his speeches and writings.
Just as Lincoln’s familiar image and legacy would have been serviceable to missionary edu-
cicators of Africans, so, it seemed, that Lincoln resonated with young Africans as a symbol of
their own aspirations for freedom and liberation. Or, as we will see, Lincoln’s words and
example might provide rhetorical support for the political arguments and nation-building
strategies of post-independence African leaders.

For young Africans of the nationalist generation, coming of age in the mid-twentieth
century amidst the humiliations of colonialism, Lincoln’s image, alongside knowledge of
histories of African resistance to Western conquest, and African American freedom struggles,
all were resources in their formative struggles for intellectual independence, cultural identity,
and moral authority. Nelson Mandela, a boyhood convert to Methodism and a product of
British colonial schooling, informs us that during the early 1940s, as a student at the Uni-
versity of Fort Hare, a bastion of the liberation movement, he performed the role of John
Wilkes Booth in a play on the life of Lincoln. The play had been adapted by Mandela’s
classmate, Lincoln Mkentane, who, not surprisingly, claimed for himself the title role. This
particular identification with Abraham Lincoln raises several questions. Was young Mkentane
given his English first name by a teacher, as Mandela, named after Admiral Lord Horatio
Nelson, had been? Or, did Mkentane’s parents seek an alternative to British imperial history
in choosing the name Lincoln? Mandela notes that Lincoln Mkentane had come from a
distinguished Transkei family, and that Mkentane’s recitation of the Gettysburg Address
received a standing ovation. The play’s moral, as Mandela recalled it, “was that men who
take great risks often suffer great consequences.”9 Precisely what was Abraham Lincoln’s
appeal to these Fort Hare students and their audience? Was it Lincoln’s penchant for a reli-
gious language of suffering, sacrifice and redemption? Or was it Lincoln’s determination in
choosing the perilous course of war to save the Union? Did their meditation on the “great
risks” taken by Lincoln help reconcile themselves to the necessity of fighting injustice?

To return to colonial Kenya, around the same time, roughly the 1940s, Gikuyu university
students were required by their instructors to recite the Emancipation Proclamation, as part
of a curriculum that resisted British colonial instruction. Through this assignment every stu-
dent had the opportunity to perform the role of the Great Emancipator, and wartime
Commander in Chief. Much more than a mere pedagogical exercise, the act of uttering the
words, “I Abraham Lincoln,” and declaring “all persons held as slaves within any State or
designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United

Lincoln in Africa
States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free” could hardly be experienced as anything other than a transgression of the colonial order. At such moments, the Kenyan students and their instructors recast Lincoln’s proclamation as a moment of resistance, voicing a thinly veiled version of their own anticolonial aspirations. “I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free;” saying so conjured an imagined future marked by an end to colonial oppression and a new dispensation of freedom, independence, and power.10

These are just two examples, but they attest to much more than the fact that knowledge of Lincoln was available to young Africans of the nationalist era. Indeed, Lincoln’s pivotal role in the African American narrative of slavery and freedom made him an icon of anticolonial resistance. During the 1930s, through the efforts of Lincoln University, which served a predominantly black student body, and was located in Pennsylvania, the name of “the Great Emancipator” would be associated with the training of West Africans intent on their own liberation, several of whom would hold leadership positions in post-independence African governments. Nnamdi Azikiwe, President of Nigeria, and Kwame Nkrumah, the Prime Minister of Ghana, were among the most prominent of Lincoln’s African alumni. At Lincoln, Nkrumah and Azikiwe interacted with its largely African American student body, became acquainted with the school’s abolitionist public culture, and undoubtedly learned of African Americans’ mixed feelings about Abraham Lincoln.11

While it is difficult to know the extent of the circulation of Mrs. Schwab’s primer on Lincoln throughout Africa, some of those destined for leadership made political use of their knowledge of Lincoln. Julius Nyerere, Prime Minister of Tanganyika, invoked Lincoln’s defense of the principle “all men are created equal” against the Know Nothing Party’s racism and nativism in support of Nyerere’s insistence on non-racialism as the basis for Tanganyikan citizenship, opposing the claim by parliamentarians that citizenship be limited to indigenous Africans, effectively excluding whites, South Asians, and Arabs. “When the know-nothings get control,” Nyerere quoted Lincoln,

it will read, all men are created equal except the negroes and foreigners and [C] atholics. When it comes to that…I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty, where despotism can be taken pure, without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

Carrying the day with his argument, Nyerere noted the slippery slope that would result from breaking the principle of nonracial citizenship, predicting the day “when we will say people were created equal except the Masai, except the Wagogo, …etc. We will continue breaking these principles.”12

Kwesi Armah, Ghana’s High Commissioner in London, drew even more extensively on Lincoln’s words to defend Ghana’s neutrality in the Cold War conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. Lincoln was instrumental to Armah’s plea that the superpowers avoid nuclear catastrophe. Referencing two fallen presidents in the same breath, Armah wrote, “…I kept harking back to the words spoken by my boyhood hero, Abraham Lincoln, a century, almost to the day, before we took a sad farewell of John Kennedy.” Quoting from the Gettysburg Address, Armah alluded to Lincoln and Kennedy as “those honoured dead” resolving “that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth…” For Armah, the survival of life on earth, rather than the experiment of American democracy, was at stake. In reiterating his position of
nonalignment with respect to the Cold War, Armah “humbly” rephrased Lincoln’s words: “A world divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this world cannot endure permanently, halfslave and half free.”

Through Lincoln’s image, Armah linked the destinies of Africa and America, joining the history of the United States, once a fledgling union fighting for its survival in a Civil War, with the challenges facing Ghana and other new African states. Writing during the tumultuous days of the US civil rights movement, Armah’s gloss on Lincoln’s “new birth of freedom,” urged support for racial equality. For Armah, such a “new birth” also encompassed the ongoing liberation struggles against white minority rule in southern Africa. Armah’s rephrasing “without apology” of the quote from Lincoln’s House divided speech not only asserted the unsustainability of superpower conflict, but also suggested that the Cold War was in fact a diversion from addressing the fundamental inequality of the global order, “half slave and half free.”

In quoting Lincoln, Armah followed the example of his boss, Kwame Nkrumah, whose engagement with Lincoln’s image and memory was arguably as sustained as that of any other African leader of his day. In coming to the United States for his education, Nkrumah, like Azikiwe, diverged from the usual pursuit by Anglophone Africans of advanced degrees in England. Nkrumah took to heart Azikiwe’s advice that a British education might dampen his anticolonial fervor, and resided in the US for over a decade beginning in 1935, receiving bachelors and masters’ degrees from Lincoln University and the University of Pennsylvania.

A brief account of Lincoln University is in order here. The University was the product of the nineteenth-century colonization movement, which, in the form of the American Colonization Society, purchased land in West Africa in 1821 in what is now Liberia for the purpose of resettling emancipated blacks. Much of the political and material support for the project of colonization was provided by pro-slavery elements in the US government and clergy who believed that free blacks were unassimilable into the US body politic. The substantial number of free blacks in the North whose sympathies lay with the growing abolitionist movement denounced colonization as a plot to weaken resistance to slavery. However, some African Americans independently advocated emigration to Africa, in part influenced by the precedent established during the late eighteenth century by Presbyterian leaders to train African Americans for evangelical work in Africa. Throughout the nineteenth century, free blacks and African American leadership maintained an ambivalent relationship to Africa, generally opposing colonization, but open to emigration at moments whenever their freedom and citizenship were under attack, as was the case in the 1850s, with the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott Decision. The “back to Africa” sentiment espoused by quite distinct actors, including white colonizationists, African American emigrationists, and evangelical clergy, provided the context for the founding of Lincoln University.

In 1835, the Presbyterian minister John Miller Dickey of Oxford, Pennsylvania, preached a sermon calling for the establishment of a college devoted to “the scientific, classical, and theological education of the colored youth of the male sex.” With the approval of the Presbyterian General Assembly, the school was chartered in 1854 as Ashmun Institute, named as a tribute to a white colonizationist who perished attempting to establish a colony of former slaves in Liberia. Lincoln’s founders sought to train African Americans and Africans to serve as religious leaders in Liberia, and with divine assistance, elevate Africans “intellectually, morally, and politically, to equal dignity with other races of mankind.” In 1866, Dickey changed the name of Ashmun Institute to Lincoln University. The evolution of Lincoln’s role in educating Africans is significant; between 1870 and 1895, 28 Liberians and one African from Gabon were enrolled. From 1896–1924, 23 South Africans and three Liberians
enrolled. Between 1929 and 1960, there were 134 students from British West Africa, and 30 others, including eight from East Africa and eight from Liberia. It was during this time, that Nkrumah and Azikiwe received their training at Lincoln.\(^\text{15}\)

While Lincoln University has demonstrated a unique commitment to the education of Africans, its character evolved considerably from its antebellum origins. Like other historically black colleges, Lincoln was transformed by the New Negro radicalism and militancy of the 1920s. That decade witnessed student protests and revolts on several campuses by African American youth against the paternalism and conservatism of often-white controlled black colleges. This was the militant environment that African students entered and contributed to, not only at Lincoln, but also at other leading black institutions, including Fisk, Howard, and Hampton Institute.\(^\text{16}\) Nkrumah seems to have arrived at Lincoln with his nationalist politics and political ambitions fully formed. He forged deep connections with the Africa-conscious segment of the African American intelligentsia. He immersed himself in Harlem’s vibrant public culture, its political parties, left, right, and center, its street corner orators, rousing church services, and public meetings on African history held at the Schomburg Library.\(^\text{17}\)

Years later, upon his return to the US as Prime Minister of the new nation of Ghana, Nkrumah was greeted by euphoric, raucous African American crowds. A forceful critic of colonialism, Nkrumah was widely admired by African Americans, particularly those nostalgic for Marcus Garvey’s message of black self-reliance and pan-African unity and solidarity. Unlike Garvey, convicted in 1927 of mail fraud in a suspect federal prosecution and deported to Jamaica, Nkrumah had succeeded in gaining the power and resources to lend concrete support to Africans still struggling against colonial rule. He had insisted that Ghana’s independence was meaningless without the total liberation of the African continent, and as a gesture of solidarity with the US civil rights movement, he had invited Martin Luther King, fresh from his success as leader of the Montgomery Bus boycott, to Ghana’s independence ceremonies in 1957. Nkrumah believed that Africa and Africans should cultivate an independent voice and influence in world affairs, and did his part, hosting the fiercely anti-colonial All African Peoples’ Conference in Ghana in 1958. But Nkrumah walked a fine line between his support for African nationalist movements still struggling for independence and his ardent pursuit of U.S. assistance for the construction of a hydroelectric dam at Ghana’s Volta River, the centerpiece of his plans for Ghana’s industrial development and modernization.\(^\text{18}\)

Having dealt with hostile elements in the British press, Nkrumah was eager to sway public and Congressional opinion to his favor in the US During his whirlwind visit to the U.S. in 1958, Nkrumah visited the Lincoln Memorial, the scene of pro-civil rights demonstrations with Marion Anderson’s Easter Sunday concert in 1939, and the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom the year before, at which Martin Luther King delivered his “Give Us the Ballot” speech. At the memorial, Nkrumah laid a wreath, mingled with tourists, and posed for several photographs in front of the massive statue of Lincoln. It is worth noting that Nkrumah also paid a visit to Mount Vernon, the residence of George Washington, a curious backdrop for communicating a pro-civil rights message. The memorial’s recent use by supporters of civil rights was not lost on Nkrumah and his State Department handlers. Both would have embraced the visual association with Lincoln as a symbol of emancipation and an American civic religion of freedom and democracy.

Posed in front of the statue, impeccably attired and aloof of expression, sharing the frame with white tourists in the background, and the disembodied folded hands of his escort officer, Nkrumah’s image as head of state seemed far removed from the stock visual representation of the hierarchical relationship of Lincoln to the freed slave, described by David Brion Davis as
“the emancipation moment.” At the request of the US government, the occasion of Nkrumah’s visit to the Lincoln Memorial was commemorated on a postage stamp issued by Ghana marking the Lincoln Sesquicentennial in 1959. In that stamp, Nkrumah is posed in front of the statue, his forward-looking gaze echoing that of Lincoln’s marble visage. Ghana circulated visual images of Lincoln once again in 1965 to mark the centennial of Lincoln’s assassination, issuing four Lincoln commemorative stamps.

Nkrumah’s visit to the Lincoln Memorial anticipated the United States Information Service’s massive global outreach campaign occasioned by the Lincoln Sesquicentennial in 1959. During the Cold War, US officials believed that educating overseas audiences about Lincoln helped project a salutary image of American democracy. Toward that goal, the USIS and the Voice of America sent out massive packets of film documentaries, taped radio programs and scripts, lectures, essays, photo exhibits, pamphlets, and comic strips on Lincoln, charging U.S. Embassies to mount programs on or around Lincoln’s birthday. The USIA programs marking Lincoln’s 150th birthday were tightly controlled. At the height of the Cold War, US officials were keenly aware of the potential for criticism of the nation’s present-day racial conflicts. Steering clear of such controversial topics, the USIS emphasized a mythic view of Lincoln that avoided the sort of candid critique offered by Frederick Douglass.

Figure 21.1 Kwame Nkrumah, 1958
On the whole, the USIS and Embassy officials seemed unaware of an indigenous awareness of Lincoln, or of African American history, that might have enriched the quality and reception of Lincoln among African audiences. US officials seemed intent on diverting Africans’ discussions of Lincoln away from the burning issue of civil rights in the U.S., an objective that Nkrumah seems to have resisted in his remarks delivered for the Voice of America broadcast, “In Search of Lincoln.” Nkrumah stated that Lincoln’s significance for Africans was his role in “the eventual emancipation of peoples of African descent in the United States,” and ending the “evil” of slavery. Noting the continuing need for vigilance in the name of justice and equal treatment, Nkrumah lamented that Lincoln’s egalitarianism “tends to be forgotten even in these enlightened times.”

Early in 1962, Nkrumah finalized an agreement with the US government, and the US-based Kaiser Corporation to build the Volta River dam project. But so desperate was he to see the project through that Nkrumah accepted terms that benefited Ghana far less than he had originally hoped. Later that year, he would be seriously wounded in an assassination attempt. He had been chastened by the Cold War’s impact on African affairs, and increasingly suspicious that the US was seeking to destabilize Ghana.

Ironically, Lincoln and the United States of America provided the model for his vision of African unity, a United States of Africa. In 1963, Nkrumah published his book *Africa Must Unite*, its appearance timed to coincide with the inaugural meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Ethiopia. This book was the ideological centerpiece, throughout Africa and the West, for Nkrumah’s pursuit of an African continental union government. Nkrumah cited several precedents in making his case for a political union of African states. He lauded Simon Bolivar’s vision, sadly thwarted, of a Union of South American States. In Nkrumah’s view, perhaps influenced by the disappointing Volta dam negotiations, political unity was a vital pre-condition for Africa’s economic development. In unity, Africa stood a greater chance of resisting balkanization and conditions of economic neo-colonialism imposed by the West. Where Bolivar failed, Lincoln had succeeded.
The United States of America, but for the firm resolve of Abraham Lincoln to
maintain the union of the states, might well have fallen into a disintegration which
would have barred the way to the tremendous acceleration of development that an
enormous agglomeration of land, resources and people made possible.

For Nkrumah, the choice was clear. The fragmentation of “national exclusivism” was to be
rejected for the road of union. For Nkrumah, Lincoln was the true founder of the modern United States of America, in
effect, the architect of its vast industrial might. It was Lincoln’s victory in the Civil War that
imposed the Union on the vanquished South. Noting Lincoln’s reluctance to interfere with
the institution of slavery, Nkrumah argued that the survival of the Union required the abo-
lation of slavery. Writing at a moment in which much of southern Africa remained under the
control of white minority rule, Nkrumah argued that Lincoln’s eventual embrace of eman-
cipation justified “our Pan-African stand that complete freedom is imperative for African
Unity.” Again, Nkrumah stressed the direct relationship between the continuance of the
Union and the nation’s industrial expansion.

What was behind Nkrumah’s strategic references to Lincoln in his arguments in support of
African Union government? Insofar as Nkrumah was addressing Westerners, particularly
Americans, his historical allusions to Lincoln as the savior and architect of the modern United
States were perhaps intended to counter Western perceptions of fundamental differ-
ceases between Africa and Europe (or the West more generally, inclusive of the United States).
Nkrumah may have been trying to overcome what Valentin Mudimbe identified as a nine-
teenth-century problem, in which European and American writers claimed “the complete
lack of similarity between the two continents and attempted to prove that in Africa the
physical environment, the flora and fauna, as well as the people, represent relics of a remote
age of antiquity.” Fellow African heads of state were another crucial audience for Nkru-
mah’s discussion of Lincoln. Yet one suspects that Nkrnumah’s emphasis on Lincoln’s act of
securing the Union by force of arms as Commander in Chief would strike rival African heads
of state as a most worrisome argument for African union government.

In any case, Nkrumah failed to persuade enough fellow African heads of state of the vir-
tues and necessity of African unity. Nkrumah, who embarked on an increasingly confronta-
tional stance toward the US and the West, was overthrown by a military coup in 1966 while
away from Ghana. From exile, he remained a leading spokesman for African liberation. But
talk of Lincoln was nowhere to be found in his later political writings. Nor would other
African leaders find in Lincoln a compelling exemplar for their political agendas. By the late
1960s and beyond, as African liberation movements in Southern Africa met with violent
repression and embraced armed struggle, Africans could look closer to home for examples of
martyrdom. Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected Prime Minister of the Congo,
ousted by a secession, and slain by Belgian troops in 1961, was such an example. Frantz
Fanon was an early advocate of armed struggle for the African revolution, and was widely
viewed as a martyr, though leukemia was the cause of his untimely death. There were other
African martyrs, victims of political assassination, including Amilcar Cabral, Tom Mboya,
years, became a universal symbol of sacrifice and reconciliation worthy of a Lincoln.

The moment of Lincoln’s appeal among African leaders was fleeting. It reflected a brief
span of some 30 years, from the 1930s to the 1960s, when many African nationalists viewed
the United States as an anticolonial ally, in large part due to their identification with African
Americans’ freedom struggles. Just as significant was the fact that for many young Africans, in
comparison to Europe’s colonial empires, the US seemed largely untainted by colonialism, and Lincoln, as emancipator, common man, and martyr epitomized the nation’s democratic promise. By the mid-1960s, supporters of African liberation realized that colonialism in Africa would not yield without armed struggle and bloodshed. To those fighting for social justice in the US it was apparent that civil rights legislation had failed to solve persistent problems including poverty, war, inadequate housing and schools. For African Americans and Africans demanding self-determination, Lincoln’s image was diminished, from the majestic icon of freedom on the Mall to the two-dimensional racial paternalism of “the emancipation moment,” the image that had crystallized African Americans’ ambivalence toward Lincoln.

Another likely explanation for the paucity of references to Lincoln by the late 1960s is the growing perception among Africans of the US as an enemy to African aspirations. Just as the meaning of Lincoln’s image was transformed in the minds of African Americans, so did the image of the US suffer at home and abroad in the context of the Vietnam War, the assassinations and urban rebellions of the late 1960s, and continuing racial strife. This critical stance toward the US as global hegemon opposed to African liberation was a profound departure from the favorable perception of many African nationalists from the 1930s to the early 1960s who viewed the United States as a more favorable environment than England for Africans seeking higher education.

All told, there are many Lincolns, or many sides of Lincoln, with which Africans might identify, or ignore, as the case may be. There is Lincoln the emancipator. But for Africans who gained their freedom from colonialism through armed struggle, the idea of emancipation by edict might seem unrealistic. There is the Lincoln of the Civil War, the defender of the Union, and here it is true that the press often compared Lincoln with Nigeria’s General Gowon, who kept that nation together in the face of the Biafran Civil War of 1967. Then there is Lincoln as agent of national reconciliation. For playing a similar role in post-apartheid South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu received the Lincoln Leadership Prize of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill., in 2008. And there is Lincoln, the deeply flawed white racist and advocate of colonization who, nevertheless, was capable of extraordinary growth under extreme duress, an image of him handed down to us by Frederick Douglass, but curiously, one that does not appear to have caught on among those Africans who invoke his memory.

With the worldwide interest in Barack Obama, whose admiration for Lincoln is well known, there is the possibility of a revival of interest in Lincoln among Africans. But if the engagement with Lincoln’s political thought and role in US history is to flourish, it will necessarily have to bring Lincoln’s legacy to bear on contemporary African problems of political conflict, autocratic governance, and the need for greater protection of the rights of minorities and women in African states. No doubt young Africans continue to have access to information on the life and career of Lincoln, through their schooling, and perhaps the internet. In retrospect, Africans’ engagement with Lincoln was too superficial—even opportunistic—to displace other pre- and post-colonial historical figures from their political imagination, and thus to have lasting significance. Think of the Ashanti woman warrior, Yaa Asantewa, who led military resistance against British colonizers during the late nineteenth century. Today, years after Lincoln’s name captured the hope and idealism of young Africans’ struggles for national independence, there seems to be a certain symmetry of misrecognition between Africans and Americans. With few exceptions, Africans, by and large, no longer view Lincoln as relevant to their present-day problems and challenges; a significant number of Americans seem dimly aware, if not resistant, to a reckoning of the place of Africa in the history of the US, its origins and founding as a slave society, the crisis of the Civil War, and emancipation. As US citizens living in an interdependent world, having marked the
bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth and the centennial of Nkrumah’s, we are all inheritors of the continuing quest for racial and social justice in the United States, and in the world.24

Notes
1 This chapter is published with the permission of Oxford University Press and is a version of a previously published work, “From Colonization to Anti-colonialism: Lincoln in Africa” by Kevin Gaines in The Global Lincoln edited by Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, published by Oxford University Press in 2011.
7 Mrs. George Schwab, Abraham Lincoln (London: The Sheldon Press, 1947); George Schwab, Ebraham Linco_n/nyemo_i mame_i (Bo: Sierra Leone: Protectorate Literature Bureau, 1955).
14 Ibid.
18 Gaines, American Africans in Ghana.
20 I am indebted to Jay Sexton for sharing these remarks of Nkrumah to the Voice of America in a personal communication with the author.
22 Ibid., pp. 210–211.
24 I am indebted to David W. Cohen for this insight.