

RACE AGAINST
EMPIRE BLACK AMERICANS AND
ANTICOLONIALISM

1937-1957

Penny M. Von Eschen

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FOR MY FRIEND GERALD HUDSON

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PREFACE

THE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK began to take shape at a time when the end of the Cold War, accompanied by frequent announcements of “the end of history,” also witnessed continuing U.S. intervention abroad, assaults on working people worldwide, and a rapid acceleration of global economic inequality. With the untrammelled nature of U.S. power ever more apparent, I was drawn to the story of a group of men and women who had confronted this global reach at its genesis. The title, *Race against Empire*, speaks in part to their sense of urgency as U.S. political, economic, and military dominance crystallized in the aftermath of World War II. It also points to the compassionate, expansive racial solidarity that animated their global democratic vision. The Cold War era’s “end of ideology” blithely celebrated the superiority of America when the United States was still a Jim Crow nation, and while millions of Africans and other colonized peoples not only struggled for political independence but fought the economic exploitation that had characterized colonialism and was further solidifying under new forms of U.S. domination. Against the grain of cynicism about democratic and internationalist projects that has deepened with the more recent assertion of “the end of history,” and against the racism that continues to render invisible black political initiatives, we would do well to remember the ways in which African American anticolonial activists of the 1940s demanded a genuine transformation of global power relations.

Over the years, the international nature of this project has necessitated an exceptional dependence on the advice, generosity, and kindness of teachers,

friends, and strangers. Marika Sherwood and Hakim Adi introduced me to sources in London, and Marika generously shared her home, her ideas, and her extensive international research on anticolonial projects. In Johannesburg, Keith Breckenridge, Cathy Burns, Clive Glaser, Tom Lodge, and Lumkile Mondli guided me around archives and South African historiography. I also thank Keith Breckenridge, Cathy Burns, Tom Lodge, and Karin Shapiro for valuable advice on early portions of the manuscript. In Cape Town, Alan Hirsch and Pippa Green shared their home, set up interviews, and directed me to important sources. Numerous librarians and archivists have provided invaluable assistance. I particularly thank Anna Cunningham of the Historical Papers Library at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

A generous grant from the MacArthur Committee on Peace and International Security of the Social Science Research Council allowed me to travel to South Africa for interviews and research, and to meet Sam Nolutshungu, whose insights on international politics and South Africa in particular have helped shape this project. Critical to the development of the project were interviews with activists in South Africa; A. M. Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Henry Momothe, Ray Simons, and Walter Sisulu not only generously shared their memories and perceptions of the late 1940s and early 1950s but also pointed me to valuable newspaper and archival sources. Conversations with Palo Jordan helped clarify my sense of the 1950s and the impact of the Cold War on international solidarity movements. A special thanks to Rica Hodgson for helping me set up interviews. On this side of the Atlantic, many thanks to Lloyd Brown and the late Doxey Wilkerson for sharing their memories and insights.

I owe an enormous debt to Eric Foner. His work inspired me to study history and continues to set an endlessly challenging example of committed scholarship and teaching. From the time when this book was a series of questions and hunches, he has been an immensely supportive and encouraging guide, as well as my most perceptive and exacting critic. I am profoundly grateful. This book has also benefited from the generous criticism and advice of Alan Brinkley. I thank Manning Marable for conversations about George Padmore and C. L. R. James, and Joshua Freeman for wise and generous counsel at crucial moments. Elizabeth Blackmar offered astute criticism, wise advice, and support at every point.

Special thanks to colleagues Leah Arroyo, Martha Biondi, and Sarah Henry for reading and commenting on drafts of the manuscript. Conversation with Martha Biondi about the 1940s and 1950s has been one of the pleasures of this project, and I am grateful for her invaluable criticism and constant support. I also thank Mark Higbee, Lynette Jackson, Anne Kornhauser, Melinda

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This study owes much to a community of friends and scholars. My greatest intellectual debt is to my friend Gerald Hudson. I thank him not only for years of conversation and love but for the outrageous imagination, uncontrollable spirit, and deep commitment to democracy as a philosopher and trade unionist that have inspired and shaped my work. Conversations over the years with Jerry Watts, along with his penchant for showing up with the right book at the right time, have been vital. A very special thanks goes to Robin D. G. Kelley, first as a fellow historian with an exceptional commitment to getting it right and an extraordinary generosity of spirit, and then as a wise adviser and kind friend. He has been pivotal in my thinking and revision of the manuscript. Thanks also to David Anthony, Joanne Barkan, Paul Buhle, Barbara Caress, Leo Casey, Darío Euraque, Barbara Fields, Moe Foner, Gary Gerstle, Jim Griblin, Michael Harris, Winston James, Mark Levinson, Peter Mandler, Tony Marx, Anne McClintock, Polly Moran, Rob Nixon, Warren Orange, Susan Pennybacker, Michael Pollak, Gyan Prakash, Haneen Sayed, Carl Schorske, Ellen Schrecker, Joe Schwartz, Nancy Sinkoff, Shelton Stromquist, Pamela Von Eschen, and Cornel West.

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My first sense of egalitarianism and internationalism came from my parents, Avis and Clarence Von Eschen. I thank them for that, along with their unfailing generosity and enthusiastic love and support. Warm thanks also to friends and siblings Patrice Von Eschen, Lou Tilmont, Paula Von Eschen, Atta Orange, Diane Orange, John and Beth Von Eschen, Mary Ann Von Eschen, Kevin Fox, and Catherine Metzger.

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engagement of Kevin Gaines. His sensitive insights and spirited suggestions have enriched the book in many ways, and his love and support have made it a far more joyful adventure than I had ever dreamed possible. There are no words to express my gratitude or my love.

PENNY M. VON ESCHEN

Iowa City, Iowa

RACE AGAINST EMPIRE

INTRODUCTION

It is not culture which binds the peoples who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an identity of passions.

—Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY IN 1940 [Americans] thrilled to Paul Robeson's singing of "Ballad for Americans" over the CBS airwaves. The son of a former slave and an internationally renowned singer and Shakespearean actor, Robeson had the extraordinary artistic talent and the capacity for empathy to express the hopes and dreams of a country just emerging from the Great Depression and facing the prospect of war. Using the same imagination with which he embraced the world's music, languages, and peoples as his own, Robeson projected in music a vision of a prosperous America not divided by race, ethnicity, or creed. His deep, sonorous voice moved Americans from all walks of life with the at once playful and somber lyrics. To the repeated question "Who are you?" the song recounts an unfinished history of democratic struggle, naming and embracing all of America's peoples, until the answer is finally revealed: "America."¹

Yet a decade later, Robeson was officially pronounced "un-American." In 1950 the United States government revoked his passport and rejected his appeal because as a spokesperson for civil rights he had been "extremely active in behalf of the independence for the colonial peoples of Africa." Two years later the U.S. attorney general subpoenaed the files of the Council on African Affairs, of which Robeson was chair, demanding "all [CAA] correspondence with the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress" and with "all individuals and leaders" of those groups.²

As the Cold War emerged, the Truman administration was forced to contend with Africans and African Americans articulating links between liberation

movements in Africa and the struggles of African Americans for civil and economic rights in the United States. For Robeson connected his own life and history not only to his fellow Americans and to his people in the South but to all the people of Africa and its diaspora whose lives had been fundamentally shaped by the same processes that had brought his foremothers and forefathers to America. And in giving voice to what Ralph Ellison has called "an identity of passions," Robeson was hardly alone. African American anticolonial activists of the 1940s forcefully argued that their struggles against Jim Crow were inextricably bound to the struggles of African and Asian peoples for independence. From Alphaeus Hunton's insistence that the liberation of Africa would make a concrete difference the struggles of black Americans to Walter White's argument that "World War II has given the Negro a sense of kinship with other colored—and also oppressed peoples of the world," activists articulated a common experience of racial oppression rooted in the expansion of Europe and the consequent dispersal of black laborers throughout Europe and the New World.³

✓ This book traces the rise and fall of the politics of the African diaspora from the late 1930s to the early Cold War years. At its heart is the story of a political project among an international group of activists and intellectuals and how their vision—for a time—animated African American politics. To make sense of their project and its ultimate demise, one must keep an eye on several interrelated political processes. ✓ The rapid acceleration of Asian and African challenges to European domination and the crumbling of European hegemony during and in the wake of World War II coincided with the creation of a U.S. wartime alliance with the major European colonial powers and the Soviet Union, followed by the shift of the Soviet Union from ally to adversary. Moreover, the United States emerged as the dominant global power, a position from which the American government fashioned new responses to Asian and African nation-building projects. In the intersections of these broad processes one begins to understand the development and collapse of the politics of the African diaspora.⁴

To illuminate facets of anticolonial politics and trace the relationship between anticolonial politics and the history of the United States emerging as a world power, the book focuses on the most visible and defining anticolonial projects, including African American participation in the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress; support of Nigerian trade union struggles and the fight against the British suppression of Nigerian newspapers; support for striking South African miners; and the joint efforts of African Americans, South Africans, and the government of India in the early days of the United Nations.

By the last years of World War II, internationalist anticolonial discourse was critical in shaping black American politics and the meaning of racial identities and solidarities. As the wartime challenges to colonialism reached fruition in the unusually fluid situation following the war, and the formation of the

United Nations provided a forum for international debate and organization, diaspora identities had a powerful resonance and diaspora politics achieved a particular political efficacy. With the imminent independence of India and the promise of new Asian and African states in the foreseeable future, the possibilities for winning political and economic rights through international strategies looked much brighter than they would after the onset of the Cold War.

This politics in the making did not survive the beginnings of the Cold War. Differences proved stronger than the still fragile international institutions and ideologies. As African American liberals began to craft a dominant civil rights argument of the Cold War era, that discrimination at home must be fought because it undermined the legitimate U.S. leadership of the "free world," and the parallel argument for an anti-Communist anticolonialism, the Truman administration and the State Department embarked on far-reaching attempts to shape Asian and African perceptions of American "race relations." An integral part of these efforts was the systematic repression of those anticolonial activists who opposed American foreign policy and who fought for the visibility of the oppression of all black peoples against a bipolar reading of politics that rendered the oppression of Africans and people of African descent a secondary issue. The embrace of Cold War American foreign policy by many African American liberals, as well as U.S. government prosecution of activists such as Robeson and the CAA, fundamentally altered the terms of anticolonialism and effectively severed the black American struggle for civil rights from the issues of anticolonialism and racism abroad. This book further explores the reshaping of black American political and rhetorical strategies in the early Cold War and the attendant rewriting of the meanings of "race" and "racism." The 1950s eclipse of 1940s anticolonialism had profound implications for the politics of the black American community as questions concerning political, economic, and social rights in an international context were neglected in favor of an ex-✓clusive emphasis on domestic political and civil rights.

The significance of the politics of the African diaspora lies both in its creative reinterpretation of a larger diaspora tradition and in its unique contribution to the world of the 1940s. The diaspora politics of this period stood in a complex relationship to African nation-building projects. Those black Americans who constructed diaspora identities did not posit themselves as members or potential members of a nation or advocate a return to Africa in the sense of a back-to-Africa movement. Yet the politics they fashioned did constitute a re-turning toward Africa and an identity defined in relation to Africa. With the demise of European hegemony and the emergence of strong anticolonial movements on the African continent, African Americans claimed a shared history and argued that independent African nations would help their struggles for political, economic, and social rights in the United States. The promise of new African and

Asian nations in the near future, coupled with hope that the United Nations would provide a forum in which issues of racial, colonial, and economic oppression could be addressed on an international scale, gave political immediacy to this vision.

Moreover, in articulating a democratic and internationalist politics, anti-colonial activists spoke to issues at the center of the reshaping of America in the post-World War II era: the relationship of the United States to emerging Asian and African nations; definitions of democracy, freedom, and the very meaning of American citizenship and what it entailed; how political, economic, and civil rights were to be defined and who in America and across the globe was to have access to these rights. And in articulating common desires and ideals, black intellectuals and journalists increasingly elaborated a conception of democracy that put the struggles of black peoples at the center of world politics but encompassed *all* democratic struggle. The solidarities and identities they formed were necessarily racial, because they saw race at the heart of the processes shaping the modern world: the enslavement of Africans, the exploitation of colonial peoples, and the development of racial capitalism. At the same time, precisely because they recognized the importance of race, anticolonial activists could point beyond it to a vision of a genuinely democratic world.

As wartime political alliances and innovations in mass communications radically altered the boundaries of the possible, this shared democratic vision gave rise to new political strategies. The new international forums and plans for the United Nations Organization that emerged in the later years of the war enhanced the possibility of redefining political sovereignty and individual and group rights on an international scale. And African Americans—from the avant-garde international left of Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), churches, fraternities, and nurses' associations—came to see these forums as hopeful sites for their own struggles and brought to them a new vision of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

✓ The power of the 1940s politics of the African diaspora came from its evocative linking of the 400 million black people scattered about the globe, as well as its descriptive and analytic value. Along with the political recasting of peoples denied political, economic, and civil rights from a national minority to a global majority, the notion of a diaspora invokes a profound history and materiality. The very concept of diaspora suggests a story about how a people got from one place to another—in this case, the story of the expansion of Europe and the consequent dispersal of black laborers throughout Europe and the New World.⁵ It is not accidental, then, that the architects of the politics of the African diaspora were historians who, more systematically than most, understood racism and shared bonds in the context of the history of slavery, colo-

nialism, and imperialism. Not only Du Bois, as the foremost historian and intellectual, but African American popular discourse in the 1940s linked African Americans with Africa and the Caribbean, not because there were biological blood ties but because their differing experiences of slavery and colonialism were all seen as part of the history of the expansion of Europe and the development of capitalism.

The international anticolonialism of the 1940s was a creative, political project among an international group of activist intellectuals. Activists who came from radically different regional political economies and lived within different national boundaries engaged in a lively debate about the nature of their bonds and the political strategies best suited to their common liberation. Far from assuming a homogeneity based on "race," they often saw themselves as engaged in an innovative project. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois argued in 1945 that "Africa is a vast and deeply separated continent and its unity must be a matter of future upbuilding rather than of past fact. Nevertheless, the people of Africa and more especially the darker peoples of Negro and mulatto origin, have in modern day, increasingly common oppression, desires and ideals."⁶ *transnationalism*

This book seeks to identify the political leaders, intellectuals, journalists, and activists who articulated the bonds between black Americans, Africans, and all oppressed peoples; to emphasize their creative interventions in a rapidly changing world of war; and to trace the processes by which their vision came to animate African American political discourse. Focusing on the Council on African Affairs, (led by Paul Robeson, Max Yergan, Alphaeus Hunton, and in later years W. E. B. Du Bois) and on the NAACP (led by Walter White) as the major organizations involved in anticolonial politics, it also emphasizes the critical role of the black press and trade unions in reshaping international political debates and crafting new political strategies.

The first four chapters trace the emergence and elaboration of anticolonial politics during World War II and the immediate postwar period. Chapters 1 and 2 show the forging of a new political language by activists and journalists whose vision of the fate of black Americans as inseparably linked to the fate of Africans and other colonized peoples animated African American political thought in a powerful and unprecedented fashion. The roots of this vision lay in the contested left of the 1930s, but it was the anticolonial challenges of World War II that gave it new power and substance. Chapter 3 explores the importance of trade union organizations to the politics of the African diaspora and looks at African American participation in the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress and support of African labor. Chapter 4 examines the diaspora-based strategies that coalesced in 1946 and 1947 as the black American Council on African Affairs, the South African Passive Resistance Campaign, and the African National Congress (ANC) came together at the United Nations

to support India's challenges to the South African government. At the dawn of the modern civil rights movement, anticolonialism and civil rights marched hand in hand.

The later chapters trace the eclipse of the politics of the African diaspora and argue that this must be understood as the result of several related political processes. Chapter 5 probes the breakdown of broad anticolonial alliances following the widespread acceptance of the Truman Doctrine of 1947. For many liberals, the criticism of American foreign policy gave way to an acceptance of America's claim to be the legitimate leader of the free world. In a fundamental reshaping of black American political and rhetorical strategies, anticolonialism did not disappear but, for liberals, was increasingly justified by an anti-Communist agenda. The repression of the McCarthy era devastated the anticolonialism of the left as well, destroying the vestiges of the 1940s politics. Chapter 6 explores the American government's prosecution of anticolonial activists in the Council on African Affairs in the context of American political objectives in Africa, and the government's far-ranging responses to African and Asian nationalism.

Chapter 7 considers the impact of the destruction of 1940s anticolonialism on mainstream African American perceptions. The eclipse of historical analysis led to a renewed trivialization, exoticization, and marginalization of Africa; the liberal definition of "freedom" in the 1950s reconstructed "race" and "racism" from something understood as rooted in the history of slavery and colonialism to something seen as a psychological problem and an aberration in American life, and from an international to a "domestic" problem. Discussions of international politics began to open up again in the mid-1950s but in radically altered terms from those of the 1940s. Chapter 8 probes the extent to which African American intellectuals, politicians, and journalists accepted the new position of America in the world as legitimate, exploring their participation in the Asian-African Conference in Bandung and the Congress of Colored Writers and Artists in Paris, and perspectives on Ghanaian independence.

In the opening epigraph, Ralph Ellison calls our attention to the power of human bonds across national and cultural boundaries. To speak of "an identity of passions" is to speak about an achievement, not something given but something that might be made. Architects of the politics of the African diaspora forged an identity of passions through a powerful cross-fertilization of socialist internationalism and the struggles of colonial peoples for independence. Yet if the anticolonial politics of the 1940s cannot be understood outside the context of 1930s internationalism, neither can it be subsumed under or fully explained by the leftist project. The intellectual and institutional links were tangled and complex as international solidarity movements among the colonized peoples of the globe creatively reshaped the language and ideologies of the 1930s and constructed the politics of the African diaspora.

THE MAKING OF THE POLITICS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

In the deep, heavy darkness of the foul-smelling hold of the ship, where they could not see the sky, nor hear the night noises, nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the agony. . . . In a strange moment, when you suddenly caught your breath, did some intimation from the future give to your spirits a hint of promise? In the darkness did you hear the silent feet of your children beating a melody of freedom to words which you would never know, in a land in which your bones would be warmed again in the depths of the cold earth in which you will sleep unknown, unrealized and alone?

—Howard Thurman, *On Viewing the Coast of Africa*

THE SENSE THAT AFRICAN AMERICANS shared a common history with Africans and all peoples of African descent had long been an important part of African American thought, but the global dynamics unleashed by World War II brought it to the forefront of black American politics and animated political discourse at an unprecedented level. Many African American political leaders and journalists analyzed the war through a prism of anticolonialism. A new political constellation emerged as anticolonial issues acquired a new prominence and stood side by side with domestic demands in the political agendas of leading African American protest organizations.¹

From the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia to the strikes that swept the Caribbean and West Africa in the late 1930s, from Nigerian responses to Roosevelt and Churchill's dispute over the meaning of the Atlantic Charter to India's dramatic challenge to the British during the war, African American political discourse was keenly informed by and deeply responsive to events in Africa, in the Caribbean, and throughout the colonized world. Even issues which on the surface appeared strictly domestic, such as the use of black American troops in the war, were approached from an anticolonial perspective and guided by the premise that the struggles of black Americans and those of Africans were inseparably bound. By the end of the war in 1945, even mainstream civil rights leaders such as Walter White, executive director of the NAACP, could declare that "World War II has given to the Negro a sense of kinship with other colored—and also oppressed—peoples of the world."