

# African-American

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**T**he African-American radical tradition, particularly in its crucial phase of the post-World War II era, is a subject shrouded in historical amnesia and misunderstanding. One of the most striking misunderstandings surrounding black radicalism—and the left generally—concerns their interaction and, at critical times, convergence, with mainstream politics. It has become reflexive for many commentators to dismiss the black left, asserting its marginality or claiming that it is “out of touch” with black communities and interests. On this point, white liberals and black nationalists alike have found themselves in unexpected agreement.

Such a refusal to note the affinities, as well as tensions, between radical and centrist politics is fatal to historical analysis. To reflect on the African-American radical tradition, then, is to recall the conditions that made personal and social transformation possible. Here was, first, a moment in which African-American radicals emphasized the mutuality of the U.S.-based civil rights movement and African liberation struggles and confronted the postwar emergence of U.S. global hegemony. African-American radicals’ (and liberals’) indictment of the contradiction between American “free world” ideals and the denial of civil and voting

rights was steadily approaching a consensus in American (and international) youth cultures, over against the Cold War’s suppression of dissent. In addition, possibilities for freedom were manifested in the vitality of black popular culture, including rhythm and blues, the church origins and resonances of which eventually symbolized the moral authority of desegregation. In addition, after World War II, modern jazz was a site for cross-cultural Afro-diasporic collaboration and global political awareness (despite U.S. attempts to claim jazz musicians as “goodwill ambassadors”). Finally, the emergence of African states from colonial rule, most famously, the republic of Ghana under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, further lent a sense of historical momentum to U.S.-based freedom struggles and inspired black diaspora solidarities. For many coming of age at this moment, these developments were hardly marginal, but deeply and ineluctably formative. At such moments, for many such persons, aspects of cultural radicalism define the mainstream; they foster new hopes, aspirations, and identities, and constitute a sense of participation in the making of history.

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# Expatriates in Ghana

## Black Radical Tradition

Kevin Gaines

revolt against segregation, were among the earliest exponents of an emerging consensus for freedom and social transformation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, shaped by the movements for civil rights and African liberation. This is not to deny tensions or fissures among and between black radicals and their allies. Nor would it be appropriate to minimize the conservative influence of Cold War anticommunism in mass journalism, educational films, newsreels, and the like. Nor, in addition, would it be accurate to deny that there were fundamental disagreements between African-American radicals and liberals on the crucial matter of the relationship of the civil rights movement and African liberation to the Cold War. But we should not underestimate the fact that for many, oppositional perspectives were undermining the legitimacy of official pronouncements and positions.

The hold of Ghana and African liberation on the political imagination of so many is demonstrated by the phenomenon of African-American expatriates, whose political outlook was representative of that moment's sense of radical possibility. At the height of the civil rights movement—between the late 1950s and 1966—hundreds of African Americans, including intellectuals, technicians,

teachers, artists, and trade unionists, left the United States for Ghana, the first sub-Saharan African nation to gain its independence from colonial rule. There was nothing accidental about this extraordinary migration. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, had studied in the United States during the 1930s. In several visits to the United States during the 1950s, Nkrumah strengthened his ties to the African-American intelligentsia, recruiting its members to contribute their skills to Ghana in the name of Pan-African solidarity. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, spent his last years as a citizen of Ghana and the director of the *Encyclopedia Africana* project. Ghana was a magnet for African Americans, whose support for Nkrumah's politics of nonalignment, African continental unity, and revolutionary pan-Africanism was reinforced by their frustration with the racial inequities and Cold War constraints of U.S. society.

The independence of Ghana and emerging African states had a profound impact on black Americans' consciousness and worldview. Black expatriates in Ghana represented an independent black radical critique of Cold War liberalism. During the early civil rights era, Ghana was for the expatriates and other sup-

porters an inspirational symbol of black power (which I distinguish from the later articulation of "Black Power," namely, the militant slogan that arose among black activists in the United States). Emblematic of this prior incarnation of black power, blacks throughout the diaspora celebrated Ghana and Nkrumah for their leadership in the cause of pan-African liberation. The example of Ghana reaffirmed for many civil rights activists in the United States the conviction that history was on their side. For others, Ghana stood as the realization of traditional African-American aspirations for African nationhood dating back to the origins of the Pan-African movement, Garveyism, and the Italian

invasion of Ethiopia during the 1930s. With such black diaspora intellectuals as C.L.R. James, George Padmore, Richard Wright, and others inclined to look beyond European and Soviet marxisms, nonaligned Ghana served as an exemplary expression of their socialist politics. Indeed, Wright's 1954 account of the independence struggle in Ghana was titled *Black Power*.<sup>1</sup>

As Ghana attempted to carve out a position of nonalignment in the Cold War, independent from both the Soviet Union and the United States, the black American expatriates in Ghana and their allies in the United States waged a similar struggle for independence against Cold War ideology and the U.S. government's attempts to impose limits on the political language and tactics of black activists and movements. The radical promise of Ghana's first republic and its potential influence on the nature and terms of struggle in

the United States *beyond* campaigns for civil rights and formal equality led to concerted official strategies of surveillance and contain-

ment. In fact, during the early civil rights era, black radicals' militancy was expressed in moral critiques of Cold War liberalism, support for the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee, an advocacy of armed self-defense against what was perceived as official tolerance of segregationist violence, support for the Cuban revolution, and advocacy of African liberation. This was what black militancy looked like during the late

1950s and early 1960s, and this radical outlook reflected an important trend in black politics, however foreclosed or forgotten. The legacy of black politics during the 1960s cannot be fully understood without reference to Ghana and the international radicalism embodied by the expatriates.

Black radicals emboldened by the radicalism of Ghana and Nkrumah were engaged in an ongoing debate over pan-African identity during the Cold War. During and immediately after World War II, claims of black solidarity connecting African Americans' activism with the independence struggles of African peoples had been central to black radical politics. But as Penny Von Eschen has shown in *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*,<sup>2</sup> with the Cold War persecution of Paul Robeson, Du Bois, and others, black Americans' advocacy for anticolonial struggles on the African

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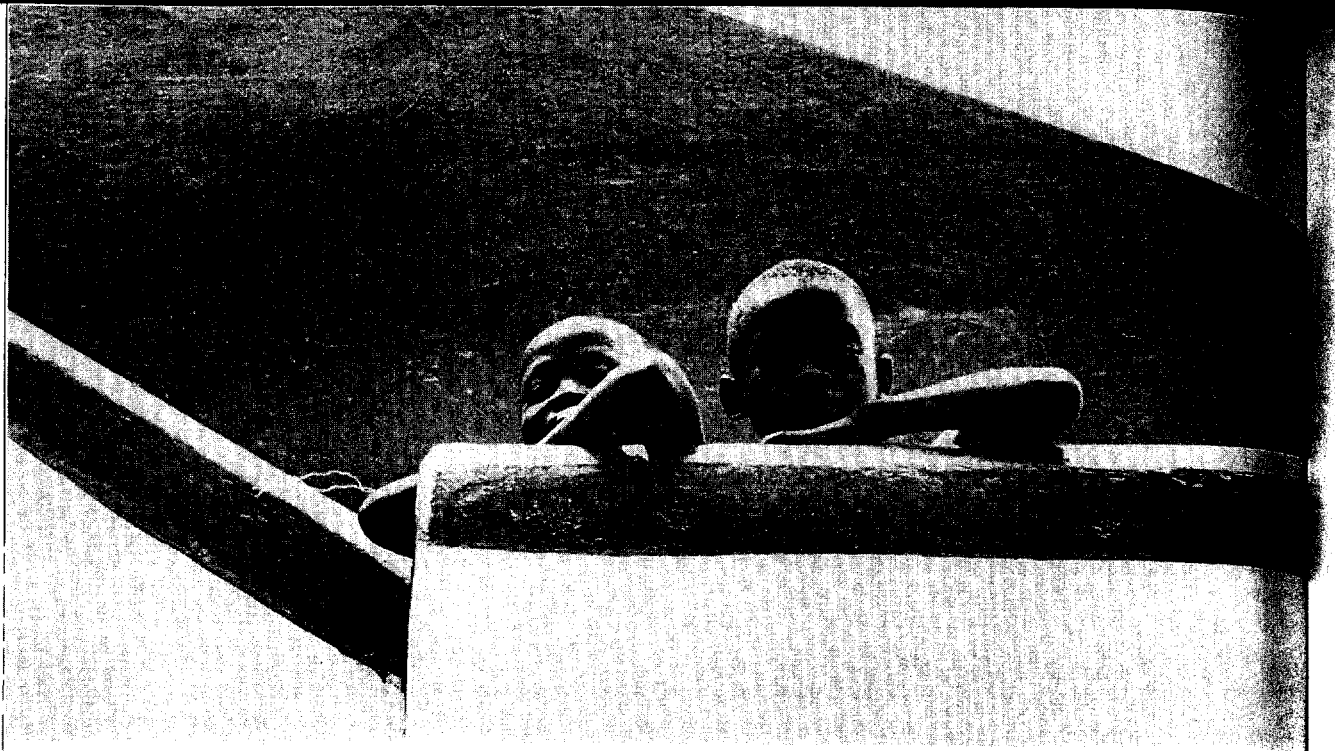
continent risked official censure as intolerable criticisms of the U.S. government's policies at home and abroad.

With the convergence of the civil rights movement and African liberation struggles, African-American jazz musicians, performing artists, and intellectuals challenged the dominant Cold War strictures that attempted to circumscribe black Americans' political identities and, indeed, to airbrush the political activism of the post-World War II era from black collective memory. The well-publicized independence of Ghana from colonial rule in 1957, coinciding with violent racial unrest in the South, sparked a resurgence in black protest and solidarities. The late 1950s also saw the founding of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) by the political scientist and civil rights activist John A. Davis. AMSAC sought to promote cultural exchange, collaboration, and heightened mutual awareness between African and African-American intellectuals. Although its leading intellectuals were Cold War liberals, AMSAC provided a space for radical and liberal black musicians, artists, and writers to independently enact their international visions of solidarity. The jazz musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach; members of the Harlem Writers Guild (including John Oliver Killens and the future luminaries Rosa Guy, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Paule Marshall); contributors to the radical Harlem journal *Freedomways*, including Julian Mayfield and John Henrik Clarke; and the poet laureate of black America, Langston Hughes, were all associated with AMSAC. African-American journalists were also crucial to this network of activist intellectuals, including the foreign correspondents Marguerite Cartwright, Charles Howard, and William Worthy. The actors Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Sidney Poitier, and Harry Belafonte shared the radical internationalism of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry. As members of the Cul-

tural Association for Women of African Heritage, Angelou, Guy, and Lincoln organized the demonstration against the United Nations and its role in the arrest and assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the revolutionary Pan-Africanist and prime minister of the independent Congo. Such prominent writers as Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin defended the demonstration and excoriated Cold War liberals' attempts to red-bait and dismiss independent black dissent.

African-American expatriates in Ghana shared the outlook of the radical dissenters in the United States who were sharply critical of a narrowly conceived civil rights agenda, Cold War anticommunism, federal indifference to segregationist violence, and interventionist U.S. foreign policy. This group placed the highest priority on black and African struggles for equality, refusing to subordinate these causes to Cold War anticommunism. The group revered Paul Robeson for his refusal to mute his criticisms of U.S. racism by capitulating to anticommunist witch-hunts. The examples of Robeson, Du Bois, and others had taught this transnational cohort of black radicals that Cold War anticommunism was a barrier to antiracist struggles at home and abroad. From the outset, these radicals were sharply critical of the U.S. government, which seemed throughout the early 1960s more concerned with African states' perceptions of a United States rent with racial strife than with responding directly and immediately to the demands of civil rights protesters. For American policymakers who tended to see racial discord as a propaganda windfall for the Soviets, it was crucial that African-American leadership, Ghana, other African nations, and the domestic civil rights movement, refrain from openly challenging U.S. domestic and foreign policies.

For the expatriates, there were many paths to Ghana, ranging from voluntary relocation to forced exile. Nevertheless, they were



*West African Youth.* Photo by Antonio Garcia.

united in their abhorrence of American racism and their advocacy of the cause of African liberation. From their unique vantage point, such figures as the novelist and actor Julian Mayfield, the social scientists St. Clair and Elizabeth Drake, W.E.B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois, the writer Maya Angelou, the art historian Sylvia Arden Boone, and their stateside allies articulated during the early 1960s critiques of U.S. racism and empire that would become commonplace by 1968. As thousands marched in the nation's capital for jobs and freedom in August 1963, a delegation of the Ghana expatriates picketed the U.S. embassy in Accra, condemning Kennedy's interventions in Cuba and Vietnam, the administration's appeasement of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and its foot-dragging on civil rights. Such forceful criticism of the Kennedy administration was carefully censored from the officially managed March on Washington. The expatriates' parallel demonstration in Ghana, arguably the most radical of several international demonstrations in sympathy with the March on

Washington, accordingly attracted far more U.S. government scrutiny than the others (including those held in Paris, Oslo, Munich, and Tel Aviv). This was evident in the detailed State Department memorandum describing the protest, which included the expatriates' original petition to President Kennedy. The demonstration received extensive coverage in the *Liberator*, the magazine of the Liberation Committee on Africa, a radical black organization based in New York.

As the most politically active intellectual among the Ghana expatriates, Julian Mayfield contributed greatly to such demonstrations. Mayfield reached Ghana in 1961, fleeing federal agents investigating his role in the armed self-defense movement led by Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina (Williams himself was a fugitive living in exile in Cuba). In Ghana, Mayfield worked for Nkrumah as a speechwriter and edited the *African Review*, an independent left journal on pan-African politics. Expatriates gathered frequently at the home of Mayfield and his wife, Ana Livia Cordero, a physician from Puerto

Rico who ran a public clinic for women in Accra. Mayfield's journalistic writings promoted Ghana's policies of continental unity and socialist development and were widely circulated throughout the United States (in *Freedomways*, *Muhammed Speaks*, and other black newspapers) and on the African continent. His columns in the Ghanaian press often carried graphic exposés of white Southerners' violent resistance to desegregation and voting rights for blacks. Such efforts made Mayfield the most notorious member of the American expatriate community in the eyes of U.S. embassy personnel.

The circumstances of Mayfield's exile to Ghana and his activities there reflect the uneasy relationship between the expatriates and U.S. officialdom and even with the mainstream civil rights movement. Indeed, several expatriates, including Du Bois, Alphaeus Hunton, and the trade unionist Vicki Garvin, were political refugees from McCarthyism. Mayfield and others questioned the movement's emphasis on nonviolent protest and demanded broadening the struggle to address the economic plight of African Americans in northern ghettos. From their standpoint, nonviolent protest lacked credibility when the U.S. government itself seemed unwilling to protect civil rights organizers or punish segregationist vigilantes. The expatriates' skepticism regarding nonviolence was shaped not only by the reign of terror in the Jim Crow South but by the violent repression of African peoples and their liberation movements, including the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa and the assassination of the independent Congo's prime minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961. With the bombing two years later of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four children, the commitment to nonviolence among many activists did not extend beyond lip service.

The Ghana expatriates and their allies in the United States were highly skeptical of or-

thodox views of domestic race relations. Indeed, their international outlook was a product of the gamut of local and global experiences of white racism in the cosmopolitan black community of Harlem (which extended downtown to the United Nations). For black radicals, this internationalism informed their struggles against police brutality and school and housing segregation in the North. All these issues, domestic and international, received thorough coverage in the Nation of Islam weekly, *Muhammed Speaks*. This deep awareness of the global dimensions of black struggle and U.S. resistance also informed the politics of participants in SNCC's struggle for voting rights in Mississippi and the Deep South, many of whom, including Robert Moses, John Lewis, and Fannie Lou Hamer, had toured Africa during 1965. Moses and his then wife, Dona Edwards, had planned to join the expatriate community in Ghana. With the military overthrow of Nkrumah's government in 1966, Moses and Edwards eventually relocated to the next destination for radical expatriates, Tanzania.

In addition to the expatriates, Ghana was host to many prominent African-American travelers. Such figures as Richard Wright, C.L.R. James, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X were attracted to Ghana's experiment in social emancipation. The impact of Malcolm X's interaction with the expatriates in 1964 was reflected on his return in his radical critique of U.S. domestic and foreign policy, which, for a time, galvanized the international left and promised to bridge activists in the U.S. South, Northern cities, European capitals, and the African continent.

For African-American expatriates, Ghana's black power was multifaceted. They experienced Ghana—and Africa—variously as a political sanctuary; as a haven for professional and technical opportunities unfettered by racism; and, more important, as the last best hope for democracy and human freedom.

More romantically, some of them regarded Ghana and Africa as a homeland. The crucial point is that for the expatriates, "home" was where they identified the vanguard of black struggle, and during the early 1960s this was understood as Ghana. Relatively unencumbered there by the repressive Cold War climate that branded antiracist dissent "un-American" and that scorned attempted linkages of domestic and international struggles for democracy, the expatriates reveled in the expanded horizons in Ghana for black statehood and for black identity, as well. From Ghana, Mayfield penned a critical appreciation of James Baldwin, which appeared in *Freedomways* in 1963, defending him in the face of a rising chorus of dogmatic and more or less homophobic attacks by African-American militants.

One important aspect of the transformative significance of Ghana for black identity is the extent to which black feminist consciousness was shaped by the expatriate experience. During the early 1960s, Ghana and Mali hosted international conferences on the status of women of Africa and African descent. It was axiomatic for many of the expatriate women that gender equality was integral to their revolutionary agenda. Such ideology was tested, and ultimately reinforced, by the profoundly gendered nature of the expatriate experience in Africa, contrasting male sexual adventurism with obstacles to women's independence. This confrontation between femi-

nist ideals and patriarchal realities contributed in part to several women expatriates' early formulations of black feminism by the decade's end. Indeed, African-American male expatriates, as well, were compelled to reflect on tensions arising from the differently gendered experiences of the expatriates. Mayfield noted that African-American women enjoyed an advantage in gaining access to the higher echelons of Ghanaian politics, an access that was not available to most African-American men. He also confessed that men like himself would visit Maya Angelou, Alice Windom, and Vicki Garvin for home cooking, which would invariably be served with a scathing critique of their exploitation of Ghanaian women. In a lengthy analysis of the Ghana coup, Sylvia Boone identified sexism and the exclusion of black women from leadership as the downfall of black progressive movements. Interestingly, Boone exempted the late Malcolm X from her indictment, identifying him as the only black male leader who in her view granted women equal status in his fledgling Organization of Afro-American Unity. The Ghana expatriates were unique for their gender diversity and egalitarianism, which emerged out of their vision of racial solidarity.

The coup that exiled Nkrumah to Guinea, where he spent the rest of his days, also occasioned the dispersal of most of the black expatriate community. Although the coup extinguished the independent radical project

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embodied by the expatriates, the Ghana experience was too deeply formative in their lives to end with Nkrumah's overthrow. Back in the United States, the expatriates remained a self-constituted, tightly knit group of colleagues, though it should be added that some remained in exile, unwilling or unable to return to their country of origin. For most, the expatriate interlude in Ghana informed their subsequent activities, as they supported and promoted each other's intellectual endeavors.

They continued to champion African and Third World liberation, yet their focus was on the United States, as they sought to nurture evolving African-American political consciousness. In 1968, Mayfield along with the attorney Conrad Lynn publicly took issue with Harold Cruse's scorched-earth polemic against black left intellectuals in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.<sup>3</sup> In 1970, Sylvia Boone convened a pathbreaking conference at Yale titled "The Black Woman," at which Maya Angelou, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and John Henrik Clarke spoke. Against formidable odds, Mayfield, St. Clair Drake, and other returned expatriates offered their perspectives and experiences in hopes of effectively channeling the anger of young militants who, in Mayfield's estimate, had taken Cruse's one-sided account to heart and mistakenly believed that history began with themselves.

What was the legacy of the radical internationalist vision of the Ghana expatriates and their allies? In *No Name in the Street* (1972),<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin produced a scathing indictment of the crimes of Western colonialism and Cold War liberalism. The spectacle of anti-Stalinist intellectuals remorselessly betraying each other and principles of civil liberties had begotten the bloody betrayals of the civil rights movement. Baldwin furiously denounced what he described as an international conspiracy of white supremacy determined to crush black dissent. Powerless to obtain the release of an assistant, a black man

falsely imprisoned for murder by corrupt New York City police and courts, Baldwin concluded that white America's self-congratulatory vision of civil rights was limited to the matter of transforming hearts, ultimately blind to the necessity of fighting inequality in the streets. Angrily renouncing the place offered him at the "welcome table" as darling of the American literary establishment, Baldwin devoted himself to affirming in his subsequent fiction the distinctive ethical sensibilities and outlook of black communities, a tradition refined by the community's historical struggle to survive the destructive forces of racism.

Baldwin's indictment of police brutality and the criminal justice and prison systems as instruments of racial discrimination is sadly prescient for understanding the contemporary plight of African Americans. And tragically, with the killing by NYPD officers in early 1999 of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant, internationalism is no less relevant for black consciousness. As African-American militants, elected officials, professionals, and business leaders join with other citizens of conscience to protest Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's arrogant attempt to stonewall justice in the Diallo case, we are reminded once again that African-American radicalism, as a response to racial oppression and state violence, is central to ongoing struggles for justice and a more democratic society.

## Notes

1. Richard Wright, *Black Power* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1954).

2. Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

3. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, 1984).

4. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972).