

Negro Notes from the U.S.A.: Social Perception and Interpretations of Race and Gender in the United States and South Africa, 1945-1965

by

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Holly Y. McGee is a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison completing a PhD in U.S. History. Her dissertation, When the Window Closed: Transnational Connections in Women's Political Work in the United States and South Africa, 1920s-1960s, seeks to locate the formal and informal activist work of black women in South Africa and the United States within the broader political landscape of domestic and international struggles leading to and associated with the Cold War. Other areas of research interest include race and class in South Africa, Afro-Marxist feminisms, black popular culture and gender in post-WWII America, and local histories of the American South.

On September 1, 1957, six Black students reported to all-white North Little Rock High for the first day of school, only to be barred from entering. At eight o'clock that Monday morning, a mob of white students and their parents met the black students—accompanied by a small group of ministers, parents, and School Superintendent F. B. Wright—at the doors of North Little Rock High. The first time the students attempted to enter, a group of white youths—some laughing and one (shown in photograph of the front-page story) scowling around his cigarette and blowing smoke in the faces of the six Black students—surrounded the terrified youths and pushed them back. Minutes later, Superintendent Wright himself led the same group up the steps of the school, only to be rebuffed again. When Wright tried, to no avail, to push through the crowd, he threatened the white students blocking his path. “If you want to stay in this school you’d better get out of the way,” Wright said. “I’d rather get out,” an unidentified youth yelled back, a remark met with cheers from the crowd. A few moments later Wright conceded to the crowd and told the Black students, “Nothing can be gained at this time by you boys presenting yourselves here.”¹

In its presentation of the North Little Rock integration effort, the *Arkansas Democrat*—one of the then two state newspapers during geared towards a predominantly white readership—played a vital role in the continual construction of racial perceptions and practice. Portrayed as righteously defiant and ultimately victorious in the face of those who would oppose the racial norms of the day, the white youths represented the next generation of staunch segregationists.

For them and fellow youths who would read of the heroic stand, the time to take up the white supremacist banner of their parents' generation was now, and for these readers—in the midst of the most formative years of their lives—the seemingly official endorsement of the event and the unpunished actions of the true aggressors helped to craft a belief in the justification of the continued system of segregation. In its unwillingness to label white students as insurgents, or to publicly condemn their actions as counterproductive to contemporary local integrative efforts, the *Democrat*—an arm of the white, mainstream media—presented a neutrally supportive stance of the students' actions. The article lacked the type of language that would have clearly marked the white students as having behaved improperly in their blatant flaunting of authority and positioned Black students as somewhat deserving of their treatment.²

As expressed by sociologist Aldon Morris, “ideological hegemony” speaks to the ability of a dominating class to control the types of information that reach the general public, either reinforcing the party line (maintaining mainstream ideas), or creating a new one.³ The reality of ideological hegemony as illustrated by publications such as newspapers and popular magazines as conveyors of public opinion offers a unique glimpse into the daily lives, expectations, dreams, and often imaginative fears of a given community or society. As a public institution, the purpose of the free press is to both represent and reflect the societies in which it exists. When there are competing racial/ethnic ideologies within a given society, however, the free press can become an uncontested terrain wherein ideas, viewpoints and opinions of dominant groups are often expressed with a decided disregard to the same of secondary groups.⁴ Morris contends that breaking away from hegemonic ideas is the most important element of social protest movements because in doing so, oppressed groups de-legitimize the system of oppression under which they live.⁵

This article seeks to uncover the ways in which the black press in the United States and South Africa worked to do just that: combat the negative images/assumptions regarding their communities as portrayed in mainstream media outlets.⁶ It examines the public face of black women, their lived experiences, and necessarily politicized work in the United States and South Africa during a time when both nations received an inordinate amount of attention from the global community to the politics of race in their countries.⁷ Of specific interest are the types of messages conveyed to international audiences regarding Black women. How did the alternative press portray Black women and issues specific to them during the postwar era? In what ways did these representations influence or manifest a shift in public and private discourses regarding the increasingly visible participation of Black women in the politics of resistance to both Jim Crow in America and Apartheid in South Africa? Along the way to addressing these concerns, this article will also explore the impact of domestic alternative press outlets to international communities. At the core of all of these concerns will be the ways in which Black women in the United States and South Africa were represented and subsequently defined in the mind of the general populace, and how these presentations shaped the ways in which societal issues specific to them were perceived and responded to.⁸

Black American Women in the Alternative Press

The very idealized prosperity of the postwar era that enabled white Americans to enter into middle-class, suburban utopia created for Blacks in America an opportunity to see the extent of their dispossession from the economic, political, and social advantages that characterized a supposedly “free” and “democratic” United States. Largely excluded from the prosperity of the times, when Black men and women in America began to link their domestic struggles against racism to the international demise of colonialism in the 1950s in face of rising international criticism and growing strategic importance of areas of the world previously considered peripheral, American officials could no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the indignities visited upon Blacks in the nation. Unfortunately for American officials, the rising status of hundreds of millions of non-white peoples around the world—particularly those in decolonizing African countries—demanded that the culture of insensibility by which it had long been possible for the federal government to ignore the organized efforts of Black Americans to attain basic political, economic, and social equalities in the United States come to an end. The crafting of Black images, both domestically and internationally, gained a new importance in the post-war years of the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁹

Determined to convey to the world the many accomplishments of Black Americans, the editors of *Ebony* frequently depicted Black women as encompassing all the goodly, respectable virtues of middle-class white women. Wives of Black entertainers became role models for women who perused the pages of *Ebony* seeking anything from a momentary escape from their own lives to updates on the latest fashion trends from around the world. Maymie Anderson, wife of famed comedian Eddie “Rochester” Anderson of *The Jack Benny Program*, featured prominently in a multi-page, 1945 spread that gave readers a glimpse of the good life Anderson was lucky enough to enjoy.¹⁰ The focus of the article was a typical rags-to-riches account of Anderson, the son of a minstrel performer who in his childhood sold newspapers on the streets of San Francisco. While the article itself took great pains to details the luxurious settings, amenities (including a large pool that neither Anderson nor her husband ever used), and amount of money Anderson earned, the photographs that accompany the article reflect the imaginative aspirations of Black Americans.

Shown at all times as the proper, perfectly coiffed lady, Maymie Anderson in one photograph sits before a large vanity mirror and table, using the many fragrance bottles, lotions and lipsticks as she “prepares her face for inspection.” Though *Ebony* does not specify the individual who will inspect Anderson’s face, it can only be deduced that honor belongs to her husband, who arrives home just as Anderson helps the maid put the finishing touches on the evening meal. The apron comes off in exchange for dinner wear, and Anderson joins her family at an opulently laid table—complete with linens and crystal—to enjoy a multi-course meal. After the evening’s meal the Andersons and their guests withdraw to the den where “Maymie listens quietly” and attentively as her husband waxes poetic on American politics and society.

When the guests depart, both Anderson and her husband retire to yet another room where the pair enjoys the rest of their evening quietly reading in front of the fireplace. The careful staging of the photo shoot is undeniable, but the importance here is not the fact that the photos were staged, rather, that through Maymie Anderson the editors of *Ebony* purposefully chose to show a life and lifestyle relatively incongruous from that of the average Black American woman in the mid-1940s, one much more reflective of white middle-class ideals.

Though the ideology of the cult of true womanhood and its cardinal virtues—piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness—were not formulated with Black women in mind, it is clear that *Ebony* sold an image of Black women modeled after middle-class white womanhood.¹¹ According to Patricia Hill Collins, Black women in America have historically “encountered a different set of controlling images,” which have included being portrayed as “mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mommas.”¹² In their overzealousness to combat these images the editors of *Ebony* lost sight of the messages they inadvertently put forth. In addition to the very normative assumptions implicit in the Anderson piece and other articles spotlighting wives of popular athletes and entertainers, *Ebony* illustrated models of “appropriate” gender behavior for its female readership. The emphasis on Black women as competent, present mothers was a dominant theme that frequently surfaced in the pages of *Ebony*.

A 1946 *Ebony* photo-editorial discussed the modern-day phenomenon of Black women, specifically mothers, who had the good fortune of being able to transfer the labor done in white houses back to their own homes. “Goodbye Mammy, Hello Mom,” detailed the historic factors that placed Black women in white homes, the lasting cultural significance of this labor and subsequent racial stereotypes, and the difficulties the domestic work of Black women in white homes created for Black families.¹³ The magazine credits World War II as being responsible for a “kitchen revolution” that released Black mothers from “white kitchens [and] put them in factories and shipyards.” *Ebony* neatly concluded that following the war these same mothers went back into kitchens, only this time, their own rather than those of white employers.

The cooking over which the “white folks” used to go into ecstasies is now reserved for her own family and they really appreciate it. And Junior doesn’t spend as much time in the street with “the gang”; he’s putting more time in on this homework. Domestic peace seems to be the order of things since she came home.¹⁴

According to Collins in her discussion of matriarch imagery, historic, “dominant ideology suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on White, middle-class children,” and in its depiction of Black mothers returning to their homes, *Ebony* gave credence to this perspective. The magazine quite clearly suggests that the responsibility to direct and improve social class outcomes is that of Black women. Apparently, once mother returns home to provide hearty, home-cooked meals, her care and presence will keep “Junior” off the streets and in his books, which means he and other children like him cannot help but become potential credits rather than debits to American society.

Indeed, according to this perspective the majority of social ills would be cured if and when mother finally came home. In this portrayal of the importance of Black motherhood, *Ebony* disregarded persistent political and economic inequalities of the era, simplistically suggesting the average Black woman laboring as a domestic worker had the luxury of abandoning her job to return home to be a professional housewife. The idealized image of a housewife who “sewed her own clothes, preserved her own fruits and vegetables, developed the arts of an experienced chef, and decorated her home with the skills of an interior designer,” was one largely enjoyed by white American women who had yet to begin articulating their woes associated with the gilded cages that their homes had become.¹⁵

Even more problematic are the questions that arise within the margins of “Goodbye Mammy, Hello Mom.” What does this editorial communicate to the women incapable of leaving their current employ? Do they, by default, become “bad” women/mothers/citizens simply because they lack the luxury of being able to walk away from white employers? *Ebony* very clearly defined “good” Black women of the late 1940s as happily married mothers (with financially supportive, present husbands) who excelled in the domestic sphere, knew how to entertain properly, and recognized when best to keep quiet. Those who fell outside of these limits had to have been either “career girls” with no children or husbands to speak of (i.e., relatively unimportant) or women who had clearly failed in their domestic capacities and, therefore, deserved their burdensome lot in life.

Based on the information presented in early editions of *Ebony*, no one could ever confuse Maymie Anderson (or the host of other women made famous by the magazine via their association with their husbands), as being in any way connected to the politicized work of Black women involved in social protest movements of the day. It is undeniable that the majority of women who graced either the cover or pages of *Ebony* during the early years of the publication were featured in borderline socially-irrelevant articles that could easily be categorized as “fluff” that either focused on the latest in entertainment news or sensationalized the singularly unsensational.¹⁶ Upon occasion when *Ebony* did chance to provide coverage of women involved in the politics of economic, educational, or social change, the presence of an article of that nature was most assuredly the exception, rather than rule.¹⁷ The racial and gender awareness cultivated over a number of decades by Black clubwomen of the previous generation was, in the pages of *Ebony*, relatively muted. Though the magazine vowed to “talk turkey” with regards to politics of the day, outside of reports on the work of Mary McLeod Bethune, the publication fell far short of exposing its readership to the discourse of resistance undertaken by women in the Black community.¹⁸

Nonetheless, these simplistic (and heavily coded) images of Black America circulated widely both domestically and internationally, and their impact was palpable. One 1954 letter to *Ebony* editors came from the Cape Province in South Africa from a gentleman claiming to have come across the magazine in the country despite its not being for sale.

In his brief letter, Robby Francis stated he “couldn’t find suitable words to sing the praises of your non-white magazine—it’s wonderful.”¹⁹ The ability of Francis to read a copy of *Ebony* is even more amazing in light of the fact that “in the Union of South Africa, American Negro publications [were] barred” by the national government.²⁰ Nonetheless, from the former Gold Coast to South Africa, the awareness of race politics in America was a familiar theme that frequently served as a source of amazement to outside observers.

Indigenous South African Women in the Alternative Press

The image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western photojournalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hands.²¹

Painfully precise in her description of the homogenized perception of indigenous African women to international audiences, African feminist Ama Ada Aidoo constructs a negative image U.S. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins maintains is reminiscent of popular views of Black American women. Culturally specific though the context of Aidoo’s depiction may be, her clear belief in the role of the media as being primarily responsible for the proliferation of this damaging assessment is clear. In the specific case of South Africa, press outlets played simultaneous roles—at once decrying the perception of indigenous women as redundant, economic drains on society, while at the same time reinforcing ideas of their social redundancy and economic inviability.

In 1949 the *Guardian* reported an unsettling social phenomenon: indigenous women with no homes living on urban sidewalks with their children.²² Due to Apartheid era policies that placed strict restrictions on African residency in urban areas, many female day laborers and wives of male mineworkers were forced to rely upon rentable hostel space when necessary to visit or remain in/near cities. Hostel rules required the women to “leave the hostel by 7:30 in the morning and [they were] not allowed to return until 3 p.m.,” effectively placing the women who depended upon the badly overcrowded shelters onto the streets. Pictures of barefoot women sitting crowded against the outer walls of the hostel, slumped in dejection amongst their meager belongings with babies in their laps accompany the article, serve as sad confirmation of the poverty that defines the lives of Black South African women. According to the article, more problematic than the reality of women having to live on sidewalks with their children was the fact that both local and national government officials were well aware of the accepted, hostel practice of turning women out into the streets. More than three years after the first series of complaints had been lodged protesting the policy, nothing had been done to rectify the situation.

Officially deemed “surplus persons” in Apartheid legislation, the treatment of indigenous women who relied upon the public hostels was of no consequence to public officials. Indeed, public officials and national offices did their best to limit their responsibilities to their excess citizenry. In a separate article the *Guardian* also detailed a new national program whereby the Social Welfare Department schemed to relocate African widows to a remote rural location while simultaneously depriving them of the monthly grants which provided for the food, clothing, shelter and education of their families.²³ The policy of the Social Welfare Department was simple: if it was possible to locate a “relative” in a rural area with whom a widow and her children could live, the government would not be legally obligated to provide a monthly grant to the widow in question. To the national government, the beauty of their ingenious plan lay in the ability to remove undesirables from society with the added benefit of no longer having to absorb the financial responsibility for their survival. The *Guardian* pointed out the numerous problems of the plan to which government officials resolutely ignored.

The only relationship between [the widows] and the family to which they are to be repatriated is that they have the same clan name...many of the families to be repatriated know nothing of country conditions, because they have never lived there...there are no clinics in the area...[and] there is neither work nor food enough to support the people who are being sent to the Reserves.²⁴

With no work, no food, no money, no real familial connections, and no potential to acquire the aforementioned resources, for all intents and purposes, African women and their dependent children were expelled to rural areas to die. The official belief of African women as expendable drains on South Africa’s society and economy, and subsequent policies designed to alleviate the public inconveniences their mere presence caused were well-reported to domestic and international audiences. Apartheid policies and practices frequently lumped all African women—regardless of economic or educational status—into the same, undeserving category. In 1949, the University of Lucknow in India awarded Laetitia Tsotsi a scholarship to travel to the country in order to study for an Arts degree at the prestigious institution. South Africa’s Department of the Interior, however, denied Tsotsi’s passport application, effectively preventing the student from continuing her studies either abroad or in South Africa, where Tsotsi had just missed registration deadlines for the academic year.²⁵ Certainly, the primary intent of the Department of the Interior was to prevent outside communities from knowing the full effects of the misdeeds of the National Party, and the fact that an African woman was denied an education in the process was both secondary and inconsequential.

By the end of the 1940s, the prevalent perception of indigenous South African women as seen through the lens of the press was set: passively acceptant, uneducated, unemployed drains on the national economy whose mere presence in “civilized” areas could not be tolerated. Black press outlets, however, attempted to combat this view by periodically reporting on African women engaged in non-traditional activities.

For example, in 1949 the *Guardian* praised 35-year old Clara Siwundla as being one of a handful of Black South African women with a license to drive. According to the article, Siwundla decided to learn to drive years earlier “to prove she could do something considered difficult for an African woman.”²⁶ Regardless of isolated stories of this nature, however, predominant beliefs regarding African women remained unchanged.

In the 1950s, a series of Apartheid legislation changed the relationship of indigenous women to the national government. The Group Areas Act of 1950 mandated the forced physical separation of races. Under the act, city planners determined areas either appropriate or inappropriate for specific races. Determination of an area as either “white,” “African,” “Colored,” or “Indian” was frequently dependent upon the viability of natural resources available on the land, its proximity to urban areas, or its proximity to other racial groups. Enforcement of the act led to the practice of “Black-spotting,” whereby white police and military forces forcibly removed undesirable populations—most frequently Black South Africans—from their homes, irrespective of tenants’ legal rights to the property. Bulldozers and tanks leveled entire communities in which many families had lived for generations. In most communities, women, children and the infirm comprised the overwhelming majority of occupants. Hundreds upon thousands of Black South Africans were turned into the streets with only the belongings they could salvage and carry. Since the national government had made little to no provisions for these displaced populations, thousands of Black South African flooded urban areas, seeking shelter and jobs. The necessity of more effectively managing this surplus population and their increased influx into urban areas led to the introduction of a revised pass law in 1952 that required *all* Africans over the age of 15 to carry “reference books” at *all* times that verified the rights of the bearer to travel, work, and live in specific locations. The Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act of 1952 meant that Black women—previously exempt from the indignities associated with the pass system—would be required to carry proof of their rights to work and move about the country as they saw fit and were able, a policy women in South Africa vehemently opposed. Thus, the decade of the 1950s witnessed a dramatic shift in the public face of Black South African women.²⁷

Mobilized both by national women’s organizations such as the African National Congress-Women’s League (ANCWL) and locally into informal protest groups, Black South African women openly defied the system of white supremacy that delineated their lives. “I am not moving even an inch,” Nogaqiwe Nsoni proclaimed when ordered by the Native Affairs Department to vacate her family home in the Cape Peninsula under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act.²⁸ Nsoni and other women in the small town of Kensington refused to obey the permits distributed by the Native Affairs Department warning resident to leave the area just outside of Cape Town. Having lived in the area more than 15 years, with multiple children, and no other relatives upon which to rely, Nozimile Didiza echoed the sentiment expressed by the women of Kensington, saying, “I am not prepared to move a step.” The importance of the planned removal of Kensington residents does not lay in the success of the Native Affairs Department of relocating local inhabitants, rather in the unified, articulated defiance of women in defense of their homes and families.

The articulation of women's protest *as* women, specifically as mothers, signified a shift in public discourse regarding the viability of women as more than mere support groups for larger, male-dominated protest organizations. Newspapers throughout the country praised women's groups for organizing and executing protest rallies and marches in major metropolitan cities against the pass system.²⁹ When a multi-racial conglomeration of women converged at the Union Buildings—the seat of the national government—in Pretoria in 1955, the *New Age* took special note of the women who “came with their infants,” in spite of the multiple obstacles in the paths of their journey.³⁰ In this precursor to the famed women's march that would come just one year later—when more than 20,000 women would descended upon the steps of the national government—approximately 1,600 women traveled to Pretoria to protest the policies of the National Party. Stating “Pretoria had never seen anything like it before,” the *New Age* detailed the demands listed in the signed petitions left at the doorstep of cabinet ministers who “ran away” from the endless stream of women.³¹

As women we demand the repeal of all legislation which aims at destroying our solidarity, which denies us human rights, which threatens the future of our children... We shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice and security.³²

Though current South African feminist scholars criticize motherhood as a basis for organization, the proven effectiveness of women's protests *as* women, *as* mothers, and *as* wives to cross racial and socioeconomic boundaries and unite previously distanced communities is undeniable.³³ With specific regard to Black South African women, the power of the rhetoric of motherhood and their visible presence on the front lines of protest marches altered social perceptions of them as categorically different.³⁴ Regardless of political affiliation, class or color, what mother could not understand the desire of another to feed her child? The success of Apartheid depended upon the national government being able to convince South Africans of inherit and insurmountable racial and cultural differences that justified the separation of the races. Women uniting along gendered lines rather than remaining separated along racial ones challenged the very core of Apartheid ideology. South African Prime Minister Johannes Strijdom realized this danger, declaring the protest a “scandalous incitement,” further stating “the ‘democratic’ National Party would not tolerate ‘the undermining of the healthy democratic institution of Parliament.’”³⁵

Not all women, however, united under the same type of banner of gender solidarity. In 1955 *New Age* reported a group of white housewives, “appalled at the thought of performing a greater share of household duties or of having no nanny to take the children to the park, [or] wash the dishes and napkins” met with United Party representatives to protest Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd's “Locations in the Sky” Bill.³⁶ As part of the Western Areas Removal Scheme to clear Johannesburg's western areas of its Black population, the Sky Bill specifically aimed to remove Blacks living from the top floors of buildings and relocate them elsewhere.

Concerned that relocated servants “would have to travel from far-off transportless [sic]” areas and “might not arrive in time to assist with the breakfast or stay late enough to wash the supper dishes,” white housewives of Hillbrow demanded that their “right to [their] African nanny...be maintained.”³⁷

The 1960s predominance of violence against women at the hands of special police forces signified yet another shift in public discourses regarding changing perceptions of Black women and their politicized work. As women increased the frequency of their protests and became even more confrontational in the strategies employed to protest Apartheid—such as standing in the middle of busy sidewalks holding placards entreating white employers to help them “Keep my baby alive!” by providing fair wages—the official use of force increased accordingly.³⁸ When possible, officials simply forbid groups of women from engaging in the politics of public protest.³⁹ When banning did not work, however, and women marched or protested in direct defiance of local and national officials, peaceful (albeit confrontational) demonstrations frequently dissolved into violence. The press routinely reported incidents of police firing into unarmed crowds, arrested women returning home from prisons covered in bruises earned in jailhouse beatings, or women fighting back against police.⁴⁰

In the course of three decades, the evolution in public perceptions of indigenous South African women as passive acceptors of their tragic lot in life to vociferous rejecters of the same unfolded in national newspapers. Proof of increased opposition to the policies of Apartheid reached international audiences and served to undermine official pronouncements of the success of the system. Moreover, the change in official response to the needs and protests of women—from blatant disregard to forced interaction—was effected by the women themselves, who used the politics at their disposal as entrée to a system that dared to define them as superfluous.

His Majesty Jim Crow in The Republic Of South Africa

Thanks in large part to the work of publications like *Ebony* and periodicals affiliated with the Associated Negro Press, from the trivial to the more critical articles, the average Black American living in an urban area was fairly conscious of developing events on the Continent. From the latest fashion trends and advancements in the medical sciences to indigenous forms of sport and the growing movie industry, Black Americans were more aware of African developments than ever before. Although fashion and entertainment updates from the Continent were pleasant enough diversions, readers of *Ebony* depended on the publication to provide them with the most important political news of the day: decolonization efforts and the waning days of white supremacy.⁴¹

Ebony published its first article on South Africa in the spring of 1946, capturing the attention of Black America with its detailed accounting of the daily lived experiences of the indigenous population. Through both language and relatable social paradigms, *Ebony* very clearly determined to relay occurrences in South Africa in a manner that would resonate with Black American audiences.

Described as the “worst in the world,” race prejudice in South Africa closely mirrored all that was familiar to Black Americans in their own understanding of the extent of white supremacy and introduced new, astonishing images of segregation.⁴² “His [South African] Majesty Jim Crow” featured the same types of posted signs declaring which buildings, public accommodations, and services were off-limits to indigenous Africans as Black Americans were accustomed to seeing in the United States. In the substitution of “European” for “white” and “Kaffir” for “Negro” in the public notices, Blacks in America could not help but be struck by the eerily similar workings of race politics in South Africa.⁴³ When *Ebony* columnists described legislation applicable to Black South Africans as “more stringent than any laws Hitler passed against the Jews or Mississippi against its Negroes” their purposefully inflammatory language aimed to rouse the indignation of a Black domestic community engrossed in postwar decolonization efforts.

The exploitation of Black labor for white profit was in no way a new theme to Black Americans, but within a South African context the economic disparities caused by this manipulation seemed even more insidious. Black labor in the South African gold and diamond industry became such a central issue of interest to the readers of *Ebony* that editors began using a new term, “Black Gold,” to describe the abundant, seemingly limitless source of potential revenue Black bodies represented.⁴⁴ *Ebony* asserted the average indigenous South African “eats less and dies quicker than anywhere else on earth,” an outrageous statement in 1946 when, due to its gold mines, the world recognized South Africa as the wealthiest nation on the continent. *Ebony* demonstrated the economic disparities between Black and white by offering figures from one mine in the Witwatersrand, which showed Black mineworkers earned salaries that totaled less than 10 percent of the salaries enjoyed by white workers. Further aggravating the depressed economic, social and political status of Black South Africans was the realization that the vestiges of white supremacy were responsible for the death of millions of Black children. Infant mortality rates in Black communities were clear indicators of the low standard of living forced upon indigenous populations, and *Ebony* reported “the [South African] government does not publish statistics on native birth and death rates” in an effort to conceal these figures from international communities. The magazine, nonetheless, uncovered the staggering, unofficial infant mortality rates of one Black community on the outskirts of Johannesburg. “Infant mortality rates among natives was 557 out of every 1,000 lives birth[s]. Benoni, a mining town, gave its rate as 500 per 1,000 native babies born.”⁴⁵

Through the example of South Africa, *Ebony* was able to show the most extreme effects of the evils of colonization and white supremacy. Extraordinary poverty, forced obeisance to racist social customs that often surpassed even those of the United States in their absurdity, the division of Black families through Pass Laws, and the ongoing murder of an entire generation of children established South Africa as *the* face of unchecked white supremacist rule in the postwar world.⁴⁶ *Ebony* quoted South African Premier Jan Smuts as proclaiming, “If there was no discrimination in the world, where should we be? There must be discrimination, you cannot run amok with a word like equality.”⁴⁷

This type of outspoken, unapologetic arrogance and the continued system of white rule in South Africa *despite* the recent conclusion of a global war instigated in the name of racial superiority, fascinated Black America in its similarity to the system of segregation in the United States, and *Ebony* fed that interest with regular editorials on the Union well into the 1950s.⁴⁸

Black Imagination and Nationalistic Impulses

The strength of *Ebony's* editorials on South Africa lay in the parallels the magazine drew between the systems of Apartheid and segregation. Well-versed in the language and workings of white supremacy within the American context—separate and wholly unequal public accommodations and services, unequal protection under the law, and the distinct lack of civic and political rights—*Ebony* presented its target audience with astonishing proof that there existed a nation where even the most staunch, Southern segregationist could proclaim whites were “over-doing white supremacy.”⁴⁹ *Ebony* branded colonialism “The World’s No. 1 Race Problem,” South Africa became the poster child of the movement to eradicate the system and its effects from the lives of indigenous populations, and Blacks in America began to imagine their sufferings as less bleak in comparison. Indeed, *Ebony* seemed to play its part in reinforcing the public perception of Blacks in America as being better off than their brethren in the Diaspora. Further and even more surprising, the magazine assumed a highly indignant stance with regards to other nations in the global community that dared to question America’s slow-growing commitment to equality:

“When European powers express wide-eyed amazement at the undemocratic treatment accorded the Negro in the United States, it is a case of the pot calling the kettle Black. They would do well to look to their own backyards, and the treatment of their Black tenants by those sent out to rule them. The United States is steadily improving the conditions of its 16 million Negroes, [and] has reduced its few colonials to less than 3 million people.”⁵⁰

While the magazine never purported to be nationalistically minded, it inadvertently and frequently appeared as just that, most especially in discussions on the hypocrisies of race politics outside of American borders.

When *Ebony* included “the stench of enormous piles of rubbish composed of oxen entrails, human excretia [sic] and decaying garbage” in its description of a typical South African squatter camp, it created in this and many other examples a space for Black Americans to be both appreciative of their locality and somewhat haughty in their perception of Blacks in South Africa.⁵¹ The magazine estimated illiteracy rates for the indigenous population to be in the 80th percentile, portrayed the same individuals as being ignorantly suspicious of Western smallpox vaccinations as “a plan to kill them off,” and labeled all non-Christian forms of worship as “witchcraft.”⁵²

Comparable to Black South Africans living under a pass system that determined their rights to “travel, to enter an urban area, to seek work, to allow one’s wife to live in town with him, to live in certain areas of town, to visit parents, to rent a room, [and] to stay on the streets after curfew,” Black Americans enjoyed a relatively carefree existence, and constant comparisons to South Africa drove this particular point home.⁵³

Just as *Ebony* drew parallels between the systems of Apartheid and segregation, so too did South African press outlets in their efforts to connect indigenous populations with other Blacks in Diaspora. Black South Africans did not have to imagine their struggles against racism and oppression as an exceptional occurrence; they were not alone. The alternative press in South Africa was most assuredly tuned into the racial politics of the United States that so closely mirrored their own struggles. Stories about segregation, desegregation, lynchings, protest marches, etc. routinely appeared in the pages of South African periodicals. In 1949, the *Guardian* reported on an anti-Apartheid meeting in London where American entertainer and political activist, Paul Robeson, performed in support of several South African organizations against the National Party government.⁵⁴ One month later the paper introduced South African audiences to the Scottsboro trial, detailing the sexually racialized nature of the case. The article condemned the guilty verdict of the six Black defendants handed down by the all-white jury, and expressed disbelief at the subsequent death penalty sentencing.⁵⁵ In 1951, the paper recalled the case of an elderly Black man in the U.S. arrested on the charge of attempted rape when an 18-year old white girl alleged he “looked at me.”⁵⁶ Four years later, *New Age* reported the lynching of Emmitt Till in Money, Mississippi, detailing the case for South African audiences, placing special emphasis to the words of Till’s mother when the undertaker suggested she keep the coffin closed for the interment. “Open the casket! Open it! Let the people see what lynching did to a child! I want the people to see what they have to fight!”⁵⁷ Even popular phrases and songs filtered their way into South African society. The words of American folk and blues singer, Hudy “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, “If you’re Black get back, get back,” became the title of a 1962 South African article that discussed Black American actors who protested against discrimination in the United States.⁵⁸ The activities of everyday individuals involved in politics of protest specific to South Africa received special attention. In 1963, Marie Louise Hooper led a picket line that prevented the unloading of a ship carrying South African goods into the San Francisco harbor. Hooper, who organized a 20-person picket line with the aid of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), had special motivation to engage in anti-Apartheid protest: years earlier during the Treason Trials in South Africa, the National Party government deported Hooper due to her “close association” with the African National Congress (ANC).⁵⁹

Alternative Power of the Pen

Though “alternative” in its relation to the mainstream publications that traditionally catered to white society, Black press publications of the twentieth century were—in a very real sense—“mainstream” to the communities that birthed them.

Readers could depend on Black publications to cater to their informative needs and provide updates on the latest political or societal issues affecting their communities. While these press outlets generally attempted to and were successful in confronting/disputing negative ideas asserted in mainstream press sources, they were not immune to the inadvertent duplication of similarly assumptive stances easily identified in their counterparts, most especially with regards to contemporary notions of gender. Whether portrayed as surplus beings or the unlikely imitators of predominant cultural values, women in the United States and South Africa existed under a microscope with a very selective lens.

In a very real sense, the systems of white supremacy in both nations were dependent upon strict definitions of disparate groups and their relation to the societies in which they existed. Justifications for the types of access (if any) to particular goods and services or sets of knowledge hinged upon the ability to show “undesirables” and their needs as foreign to mainstream society. The work of women filling in the gaps for their communities when and where national governments failed to serve (from school-feeing schemes to literacy clubs) received much less attention than more stories that reinforced negative contemporary contextualizations of women as everything from hyper-sexualized beings to begging drains on society. Most often operating in defense of either the responsibilities associated with their work as wives/mothers or their persons, the efforts of black women in popular civil protest organizations (such as the Sojourners for Truth & Justice in the U.S. or the ANC-WL in South Africa) frequently found themselves preempted for supposedly larger nationalistic aims. Even the resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1950s—largely (and merely) rhetorical for black women across the globe—was unable to provide them with the necessary platform to shape their protest in such a way as to distinguish black women’s protest as simultaneously gender *and* race-based. Through fraught with issues regarding its sometimes idealized portrayal of women, alternative press publications like *Ebony* and *Drum* played a vital role familiarizing domestic and international communities to the general existence of blacks in their respective societies and women in their specific needs.

¹ *Arkansas Democrat*, 9 September 1957.

² Eventually, on September 15, North Little Rock Superintendent Wright officially buckled to community pressure and encouraged the six Black students denied entrance to North Little Rock High School to attend the segregated Jones High School. Examples of the negative crafting of black images in America abound primarily because post-reconstruction segregation was predicated upon the assertion of many white males that racial equality—a right Blacks in America were slowly working towards economically, educationally and politically—was, in fact, a ruse by the Black male to gain sexual access to white women. In the 1940s and 1950s the *Democrat* routinely played a part in sustaining this particular assumption. It reported in 1957 that a Black man from North Little Rock was arrested and charged with the rape of a 15 year-old white girl because he matched a “sketchy description” given by the girl’s companion. Neither the young girl nor her boyfriend could supply an accurate description of the assailant—whom the couple claimed drove up next to their parked car and “thrust the boy aside and criminally assaulted the girl”—other than the fact the girl *thought* the Black man who assaulted her was wearing khaki pants. This brief article and many others like it only served to reinforce the widespread myth of the hyper-sexualized Black man. *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 September 1957.

³ Morris, Aldon, “Centuries of Black Protest: Its Significance for America and the World,” in *Race in America: The Struggle for Equality*, eds. Herbert Hill and James E. Jones, Jr., (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 20.

⁴ In the United States, this harsh reality was the impetus for the first Black-owned and operated newspaper. Established in 1827 by a former slave, John Russworm, *Freedom’s Journal* existed as a direct response to an editorial written by a white, New York journalist, Mordecai Noah. Noah had dared to question the right and ability of free Blacks to live in a republic, and Russworm and later co-editor Samuel Cornish sought to challenge Noah’s assertions by focusing on the accomplishments of the free Black population. Wallace, Aurora, *Newspapers and the Making of Modern America: A History* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005).

⁵ According to Morris, “hegemonic consciousness justifies status quo arrangements,” and rejecting these ideas allows oppressed groups to develop and oppositional consciousness. Morris, “Centuries of Black Protest,” 23.

⁶ The purpose of this article is not to describe or even analyze the history of the black press in America, or the significance of the black press to social movements within my given periodicity, as such accounts and analyses have been done elsewhere. For more on these subjects see Jacobs, Ronald N., “Race, media, and multiple images,” in *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19-30.

Jacobs suggests that contemporary civil society is separated into competing public spheres, and that this is most especially recognized when looking at the phenomenon of the black press in America. According to the author, the historical need for an oppositional voice from within the black community arose from the knowledge that black Americans “could not count on the mainstream press of the time to publicize Black vices or to represent Black issues in a non-patronizing manner,” 21.; Wallace, Aurora, “The Black Press Goes to War: The *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005), 53-76. Utilizing three of the most popular periodicals of the era, Wallace examines the instrumental role of the Black press in bringing national attention to black American war efforts and international attention to the hypocritical race policies of the United States which denied the black community to fully participate in and serve their country.

⁷ The eyes of the world were on the United States and South Africa, and information provided via the media placed each nation under intense scrutiny. Televised and published accounts of beatings, lynchings, and race riots throughout America caused such an embarrassment in front of international audiences that the federal government was forced to finally begin dismantling a system of white supremacy centuries in the making. On the other side of the Atlantic, while other African nations made preparations for an end to colonial rule (albeit slowly in many instances), a white minority in the wealthiest country on the continent created a system that allowed them to further ensure their political and economic dominance over a dispossessed black majority.

⁸ The bulk of the primary source material for this chapter is drawn from approximately twenty years worth of magazine and newspaper articles from both the United States and South Africa. While it would be impossible to survey each and every Black-owned, operated, or targeted periodical and magazine in both nations during the given period, by purposefully examining specific publications with extensive circulations and those with a smaller readership yet recognized social popularity within Black communities, it is possible to gain insight into both societies and the role of periodicals in reinforcing, shaping and rejecting constructed ideas of race and gender.

⁹ Examples of the impact of race on American domestic and foreign policy during the Cold War include Borstelmann, Thomas, *The Cold War and The Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Dudziak, Mary, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Examples of the formal and informal linkages between Blacks in the United States and South Africa include Plummer, Brenda G., *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anderson, Carol, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955*; Von Eschen, Penny M., *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*.

¹⁰ “Rochester: Radio star finds long greens buy lots of comfort and ease,” *Ebony*, November 1945, 3; “This is the house that Jack built,” *Ebony*, November 1945 4-7.

¹¹ Welter, Barbara, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Summer 1966).

¹² Collins, Patricia Hill, “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: New York, 2000), 72, 69.

¹³ “Goodbye Mammy, Hello Mom,” *Ebony* March 1946, 36-37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rosen, Ruth, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 14.

¹⁶ “A Date With Anna: A Tale of Two-City Triumph by a Love-Hungry Girl from Harlem,” *Ebony*, December 1945, 17-23; “Model Marva: Gay Divorcee Finds that Gowns are Expensive by Nice Hobby,” *Ebony*, December 1945, 10-11; “Miracle Cure: Vera Boykin Heals All Races with Prayer,” *Ebony*, February 1946, 30-33.

¹⁷ “Women Leaders,” *Ebony*, July 1949, 19-22.

¹⁸ “Backstage,” *Ebony*, 2; “College Oasis in Dixie,” *Ebony*, May 1946, 42-47; “My Secret Talks with FDR,” *Ebony*, April 1949, 42-51.

¹⁹ “African Readers,” *Ebony*, May 1954

²⁰ “What Africans Think About Us,” *Ebony*, February 1954, 37.

²¹ Aidoo, Ama Ata, “The African Woman Today,” as quoted in Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 241.

²² “Pavement Is Their Home: No Accommodation for African Women,” *Guardian*, March 24, 1949, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

²³ “African Widows Sent To The Reserves,” *Guardian*, March 24, 1949, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “African Woman Student Victimised [sic],” *Guardian*, September 22, 1949, University of Cape-Town, African Studies Library.

²⁶ “Clara Likes Driving,” *Guardian*, March 10, 1949, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

²⁷ Les Switzer asserts that a “new image” of African women emerged in the wake of the anti-pass campaigns of the 1950s. Switzer, Les, and Mohamed Adhikari, *South Africa’s Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation Under Apartheid* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 321. More importantly, a new “self-image” of African women emerged. According to Switzer, women “had seen African men ‘disappear’ in pass raids and families destroyed by imprisonment for failure to have passes in order, and they were not going to have it happen to them,” (322).

²⁸ “Women Ordered to Leave Cape Town,” *New Age*, April 21, 1955, University of Cape-Town, African Studies Library.

²⁹ “Countrywide Campaign Against Passes for Women,” *New Age*, November 24, 1955, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

³⁰ “Pretoria Conquered By The Women!” *New Age*, November 3, 1955.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Bravo Women!” *New Age*, November 3, 1955, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

³³ Fester, Gertrude, “Merely Motherhood Perpetuating Patriarchy?: Women’s Organizations in the Western Cape, South Africa,” Cape Town; “World Conference of Mothers,” *New Age*, July 7, 1955, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library; “African Women’s Conference,” *New Age*, October 28, 1954, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

³⁴ “Mothers Plan Protest Deputation to Pretoria,” *New Age*, August 11, 1955, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Hillbrow Housewives Heated,” *New Age*, April 21, 1955, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Organize or Starve!” *Spark*, February 28, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library; “P.E. Protest Against Passes for Women,” *Spark*, January 31, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library; “Reef Women Plan Last-Hour Protests,” *Spark*, January 24, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

³⁹ “Women’s Pass Protest Banned in Jo’Burg,” *Spark*, February 17, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

⁴⁰ “Elethu Funks a Word—The Shot was Fired by a Cop,” *Spark*, March 21, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library; “Bombs explode in Durban Beerhalls,” *Spark*, February 14, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library; “Women on Public Violence Charge,” *Spark*, February 14, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

⁴¹ “African Influence on Fashion,” *Ebony*, June 1948, 48-50; “Africa’s New Medicine Men,” *Ebony*, February 1947, 22-25; “Kings of Jump,” *Ebony*, March 1946, 26-27; “Movie Making in Africa,” *Ebony*, 48-50.

⁴² Two photographs in particular from the article discussed illustrate the highly irrational nature of Apartheid for American audiences. In one, the uniformed doorman at a prominent Durban hotel sits barefoot just outside the establishment due to a South African social custom that forbid Blacks from wearing shoes upon entering white homes. The second photograph depicts two waiters servicing the same table. The necessity of two waiters was simple: non-whites were not allowed to handle alcohol and the seated couple had ordered a whisky and lemonade. A white waiter was on hand to pour the whisky while his darker counterpart patiently waited to pour the lemonade. “His Majesty Jim Crow,” *Ebony*, April 1946, 13.

⁴³ The contemporary evolution and implication of the word “Kaffir” in South African society cannot be discounted. Originally translated as “infidel” by 15th century Islamics, the term merely defined non-Muslim, African natives. Due to the European slave trade the term became a part of multiple lexicons—Portuguese, Greek, English, Dutch—and while the spelling of the word shifted it managed gain additional, negative connotations. Eventually the term was utilized to refer to all things Africa, most specifically indigenous populations of Southern Africa. In the case of South Africa, the term became a racial slur, contemporarily similar to the pejorative use of the word “nigger” in the United States.

⁴⁴ “‘Black Gold’ Gives Red Gold Its Glitter In South Africa,” *Ebony*, April 1946, 14-15; Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “The World’s Worst Slums,” *Ebony*, November 1947, 39; “Minister Puts Civilization on Trial in African Court,” *Ebony*, November 1947, 40-42; “Pass System Keeps Prisons Filled With Bantus All Year,” *Ebony*, November 1947, 43.

⁴⁷ “Black and Yellow Gold,” *Ebony*, May 1947, 26-27.

⁴⁸ “The World’s Most Prejudiced Nation,” *Ebony*, February 1951, 96-97; “Housing in South African Slums is Worst in World,” *Ebony*, February 1951, 98-99; “All Africa Stirring with Cries for Self-Rule,” *Ebony*, February 1951, 100-101; “Cry, The Beloved Country,” *Ebony*, July 1951, 57-60.

⁴⁹ “The World’s No. 1 Race Problem,” *Ebony*, May 1954, 90; After a tour of South Africa in 1946, United States Senator Allen J. Ellender made this pronouncement. An elected member of the Southern Dixiecrat party from 1937 until his death in 1972, Ellender was part of the solid block of Southern Democrats who worked to prevent the passing of anti-lynching legislation during the 1938 congressional session. “I believe in white supremacy,” Ellender boasted during proceedings that eventually ended unsuccessfully for supports of the bill, “and as long as I am in the Senate I expect to fight for white supremacy.”; Kennedy, David M., “How FDR Lost the Struggle to Enact an Antilynching Bill,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 25 (Autumn, 1999), 120-121.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “The World’s Worst Slums,” *Ebony*, November 1947, 39.

⁵² “Minister Puts Civilization on Trial in African Court,” *Ebony*, November 1947, 40-41.

⁵³ “Pass System Keeps Prisons Filled With Bantus All Year,” *Ebony*, November, 1947, 43.

⁵⁴ “Paul Robeson’s Plea For Freedom in South Africa,” *Guardian*, March 31, 1949

⁵⁵ “Legal Lynching in United States,” *Guardian*, April 14, 1949, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

⁵⁶ “Looked at girl,” *Guardian*, August 2, 1951, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

⁵⁷ “Lynch-Law Again Strikes Negroes,” *New Age*, October 13, 1955, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

⁵⁸ “If you’re Black, get back, get back,” *Spark*, December 27, 1962, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.

⁵⁹ “Mrs. Hooper Stops A South African Cargo,” *Spark*, January 19, 1963, University of Cape Town, African Studies Library.