In this article, Abou B. Bamba considers postwar French policy in Africa as portrayed by the American press, which he presents as a “transnational political actor (336).” He argues that the American media and public spheres were at the “forefront of transnational politics of imperial exit.” Bamba suggests that the American push towards the end of imperialism began in the interwar period and was heralded by black intellectuals including Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, and Ralph Bunche. For the author, American journalists in the 1950s unmasked the French Union and various development projects as schemes through which France sought to strengthen its imperial hold on African territories (337). Positing press coverage in the New York Times, the Washington Post and elsewhere as representative of American public opinion, the author insists that “American public spheres” viewed France’s continuing imperial influence as outdated at best, and at worst, unjust (342). In the mid-to-late 1950s, anti-imperial American journalism, which Bamba views as “performative,” caused French “diplomatists” (335, 341) to undertake “political marketing beyond the borders of empire” (335) and “state branding” campaigns to present France as a promoter of modern development as it prepared African territories for internal autonomy within a federated Greater France (337). The author utilizes a novel array of sources to argue that: “the dissolution of France’s empire in French West Africa was not simply a Franco-African affair” (328). The article thus broadens the scope of the history of Africa’s decolonization and opens important avenues for its exploration. Despite these strengths, the article contains some empirical and conceptual shortcomings that warrant further examination.

The suggestion is not that Bamba should have considered every political movement in independence-era continental Africa; but that reference to this new body of literature might have better contextualized the origins and workings of the transnational media circuits he identifies. Without a doubt, African activists

\footnote{Matthew Connelly, *Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post Cold-War Era*, 2002.}
understood, earlier than their colonial administrators or their anti-imperialist allies, the importance of the media as a “transnational political actor” and sought contacts overseas to help them utilize its full potential.5 The question, then, is not why French “diplomatists” took up similar tactics, but rather, whether it was indeed American diplomacy that pushed them to do so, and also why they waited until so late in the game (mid-to-late 1950s) to undertake the “political marketing” and “state-branding” that Bamba describes.

In order to understand the ways that global media outlets functioned as transnational political actors, it is useful to look closely at how and in what instances they functioned. France’s desire to polish its image in Africa began at the United Nations (UN), with the implementation of the Trusteeship system in which U.S. State Department advisor and founding UN delegate Ralph Bunche, who is mentioned in Bamba’s article for other reasons, played a major role.6 French Togo, for instance, was more than just one of many territories in French West Africa with a slightly different “legal status under international law (335).” The jurisdictional particularities of trust territories became the very basis on which many anticolonialists, whether African, European, or American, fashioned legal arguments against European rule.7 In the case of French Africa, as early as 1946 African political leaders, supported by French lawyers from the Left, crafted legal arguments against France’s incorporation of Togo and Cameroon into the French Union while the French ministers of Foreign Affairs and Overseas France asked metropolitan legal experts to prove the French Union’s compatibility with the UN Trusteeship system.8 These legal debates quickly spilled over into the UN Trusteeship Council and the UN General Assembly while overseas colonial courtrooms throughout continental Africa under French rule became, for a time,

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8 Archives nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM)/Fonds ministeriels/Affaires politiques 2314, Carton 4 and ANOM/Fonds ministeriels/ Délégation Cameroun-Togo, Carton 3.
an anticolonial battlefront.\(^9\) Due, in part, to UN scrutiny and the tone of legal discussions in the air, French territorial administrators harbored great anxieties about Gold Coast politics contaminating French Togo via British territory.\(^10\) By the late 1940s, the first human rights Non-Governmental-Organization (NGO) to acquire consultative status at the UN, the New York-based International League of the Rights of Man (ILRM), began to use trusteeship status as a juridical argument to penetrate, writ large and rather successfully, European administering authorities’ claims to sovereignty. As ad-hoc members of the UN via the Trusteeship Council, African petitioners from trust territories traveled to New York where they addressed assembled nations, met with anticolonial and human rights activists affiliated with the ILRM and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) and, perhaps most importantly, entered into dialogue with each other.\(^11\) The importance of the trust territory cases to anticolonial American activists from the late 1940s on certainly explains the interest that “American columnists and pundits” had in Togo’s “drive towards self-rule” and their “jubilant” reaction to its independence (339).

In the first part of his article, Bamba discusses the anti-imperialist interwar writings of black activists that gained notoriety in grassroots Pan-Africanist circles of the 1930s. The author later presents the writings of American journalists who toured Africa in the late 1950s as somehow continuing this earlier vein of anti-imperial commentary. He writes: “... the reports that came out of these [1950s] African tours interestingly concurred with the conclusions of those who had argued in the interwar period that French imperialism was a momentous hypocritical project...” (340) and references the 1920s and 1930s publications of Marcus Garvey, Ralph Bunche and George Padmore (hardly a cohesive trio of thinkers). However, there is neither evidence here of a connection between the 1950s journalists who toured Africa to the ideas of Garvey, Bunch, and Padmore; nor, despite a steady proliferation of scholarship on the topic, a discussion of the transformation of black American and/or diasporic activism in the postwar, early Cold War age.\(^12\) Because we are told so little about the journalists Bamba cites, it is

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\(^10\) See, for example, ANOM/Fonds ministeriels/Affaires politiques 2183, Carton 4.


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difficult to see whether their response to Africa’s decolonization had historical roots in the interwar ideas he presents earlier, or whether their writings resonated with African American anticolonialists in the postwar United States. Space is limited in a journal-length article, yet a consideration of the existing literature might have allowed the author to avoid some of the “leapfrogging legacies” at play here.

The degree to which media were influential in shaping public opinion or foreign policy merits much closer examination as well. The evidence does not support the notion that Americans concerned about the liberation of Africa were representative of public opinion or that, at their behest, the American media acted as a “mediator and intensifier of public discussions” (339) of Africa’s future. Despite a few burgeoning networks, both African and American activists decried a relative absence of public opinion on colonial matters in the U.S. In contrast with France or Britain where, as early as the 1950s, discussions of colonialism, empire, and anti-apartheid packed a political punch of a certain kind be it to the Right or to the Left, organizers with the NAACP, the Civil Rights Congress, the National Negro Congress, the ILRM and its affiliate, the American Committee On Africa (ACOA), who were among those responsible for getting any press coverage at all, had difficulty rounding up an audience for anticolonial activists on the lecture circuit. Despite the NAACP’s early interest in supporting African bids for self-determination, the organization’s vision shifted from human rights on an international scale to civil rights for African Americans as its leadership became disillusioned with the UN and took up the struggle on the domestic battlefields of the Jim Crow Southern states.14 Not until after the demise of the French empire (circa 1960) did African Americans turn out en masse to attend anticolonial rallies,


14 Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize* and “Rethinking Radicalism.”
a mobilization within which mainstream American journalism seems to have played a negligible part.15


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