Tell no lies; claim no easy victories.

Amilcar Cabral Party Directives, 1965



Demonstration organized by Stop the Apartheid Rugby Tour, New York City, 1981. Photo by David Vita.



# African Liberation and American Activists Over a Half Century, 1950–2000

Edited by William Minter, Gail Hovey, and Charles Cobb Jr.

Africa World Press, Inc.



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Book and cover design: Saverance Publishing Services

Front cover photos: top, David Vita; center, courtesy of Stephanie Urdang; bottom, Rick Reinhard. Back cover photo: David Vita.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

No easy victories: African liberation and American activists over a half century, 1950-2000 / edited by William Minter, Gail Hovey, and Charles Cobb Jr.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-59221-574-2 (hardback) -- ISBN 1-59221-575-0 (pbk.)

1. Africa--Relations--United States. 2. United States--Relations--Africa. 3. Political activists--United States--History--20th century. 4. Political activists--Africa--History--20th century. 5. African American political activists--History--20th century. 6. Africa--History--Autonomy and independence movements. 7. National liberation movements--Africa--History--20th century. 8. Civil rights movements--United States--History--20th century. I. Minter, William, 1942- II. Hovey, Gail, 1940- III. Cobb, Charles E., Jr., 1943-

DT38.N58 2007 303.48'2730609045--dc22

2007020577



The mythical Sankofa bird, from the Akan people of West Africa, always flies forward while looking back. It holds an egg symbolizing future generations in its mouth. The Sankofa bird reminds us that we need to understand the past in order to move forward to build the future.



Paul Stookey and Mary Travers of Peter, Paul, and Mary sing in front of the South African embassy as Randall Robinson and Desmond Tutu look on, January 8, 1986. Photo © Rick Reinhard.

#### **Contents**

| Foreword   Nelson Mandela                                      | viii             |             |   |
|--|------------------|-------------|---|
| Preface and Acknowledgments                                    | ix               |             |   |
| Map of Africa Map of Southern Africa Abbreviations             | xiv<br>xv<br>xvi |             |   |
|  |                  | Voices      | 1 |
|  |                  | Keith Lewis | 2 |
| Erin Polley  | 4                |             |   |
| Dara Cooper  | 6                |             |   |
| Chapter 1 • An Unfinished Journey   William Minter             | 9                |             |   |
| A Half Century of Connections                                  | 12               |             |   |
| The 1950s  | 15               |             |   |
| The 1960s  | 22               |             |   |
| The 1970s  | 27               |             |   |
| The 1980s  | 37               |             |   |
| The 1990s  | 48               |             |   |
| Chapter 2 • The 1950s: Africa Solidarity Rising   Lisa Brock   | 59               |             |   |
| Race, Ideology, and the Fall of the Council on African Affairs | 60               |             |   |
| George Houser and the American Committee on Africa             | 62               |             |   |
| Two Voices: Charlene Mitchell and Bill Sutherland              | 67               |             |   |
| Alphaeus Hunton: Why Worry about Africa?                       | 73               |             |   |
| E. S. Reddy: Behind the Scenes at the United Nations           | 74               |             |   |
| Robert S. Browne: A Voice of Integrity                         | 77               |             |   |
| Peter and Cora Weiss: "The Atmosphere of African Liberation"   | 79               |             |   |
| Chapter 3 • The 1960s: Making Connections   Mimi Edmunds       | 83               |             |   |
| From California to Kenya                                       | 84               |             |   |
| Mary Jane Patterson: Missionary on Two Continents              | 85               |             |   |
| From Kenya to New York   | 87               |             |   |
| Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane: Educator in Exile                 | 88               |             |   |
| Prexy Nesbitt: Activist Networker Extraordinaire               | 91               |             |   |
| Mia Adjali: United Methodist Women and African Liberation      | 94               |             |   |
| Harry Belafonte: A Committed Life                              | 98               |             |   |
| Charles Cobb Jr. : From Atlanta to East Africa                 | 100              |             |   |
| Walter Bgoya: From Tanzania to Kansas and Back Again           | 103              |             |   |
| Miriam Makeba: "Mama Africa"                                   | 107              |             |   |
| Media for the Movement: Southern Africa Magazine               | 110              |             |   |
| Chapter 4 • The 1970s: Expanding Networks   Joseph F. Jordan   | 113              |             |   |
| The Influence of the Liberation Movements                      | 117              |             |   |
| A Watershed Moment: The Defeat of Portuguese Colonial Rule     | 118              |             |   |

| Strategy and Tactics   | 120 |
|--|-----|
| The Link between Organizing and Community Consciousness                            | 123 |
| Emerging Activism in the Black Community   | 124 |
| African Liberation Day and the ALSC  | 126 |
| Remembering Nyerere  | 129 |
| Charles Diggs and Goler Butcher: Taking the Lead on Africa in the U.S. Congress    | 131 |
| Durham, Durban, and AllAfrica: Reed Kramer and Tami Hultman                        | 134 |
| "The Angolan Question": Walter Rodney Speaks at Howard University, 1976            | 139 |
| Robert Van Lierop: A Luta Continua   | 142 |
| From Kenya to North America: One Woman's Journey                                   | 144 |
| From Campus to Statehouse: East Lansing Connections                                | 147 |
| Chapter 5 • The 1980s: The Anti-Apartheid Convergence   David Goodman              | 151 |
| Global Outrage, Local Actions  | 153 |
| The Movement at Home: U.S. Anti-Apartheid Activism                                 | 157 |
| American Activist in the Frontline States  | 162 |
| At Decade's End  | 165 |
| Sylvia Hill: From the Sixth Pan-African Congress to the Free South Africa Movement | 167 |
| Jennifer Davis: Clarity, Determination, and Coalition Building                     | 169 |
| Jean Sindab: Connecting People, Connecting Issues                                  | 173 |
| Public Investment and South Africa   | 175 |
| "South Africa Is Next to Namibia": The Lutheran Connection                         | 177 |
| Race and Anti-Apartheid Work in Chicago  | 179 |
| From Local to National: Bay Area Connections                                       | 182 |
| Chapter 6 • The 1990s: Seeking New Directions   Walter Turner                      | 187 |
| Bay Area Activism in the 1970s and 1980s   | 188 |
| New Ways of Connecting   | 190 |
| Africa in the New Global Context   | 192 |
| Starting Over with Public Education  | 194 |
| Campaigning for Democracy in Nigeria   | 196 |
| New Contexts for Solidarity  | 199 |
| "Faces Filled with Joy": The 1994 South African Election                           | 201 |
| Philippe Wamba: New Pan-African Generation   | 205 |
| How I Learned African History from Reggae  | 209 |
| In Motion: The New African Immigration   | 213 |
| Voices   | 217 |
| Nunu Kidane  | 218 |
| Neil Watkins   | 220 |
| Anyango Reggy  | 222 |
| Afterword  | 225 |
| References   | 229 |
| Contributors   | 236 |
| Index  | 238 |



# Foreword by Nelson Mandela

he title of this book, *No Easy Victories*, is well chosen. Taken from the great West African leader Amilcar Cabral, it reminds us that the people of Africa, struggling to end colonialism and gain majority rule, paid, and continue to pay, a heavy price. Some, like Cabral himself, were killed before achieving the prize of victory and they are too little remembered. Others, like me, were able to complete our long walk to freedom and have remained in the public eye. Despite the best efforts of the apartheid regime to make me invisible, I walked out of prison after 27 years into the glaring light of television cameras that projected my release around the globe. This was proper, for my release was the result of developments in South Africa, strengthened by the demand for my freedom from a worldwide anti-apartheid movement.

The editors and authors of this book have undertaken to tell the story of the American involvement not just in the anti-apartheid movement, but also in the broader anticolonial movement that is decidedly less well known. As it recounts five decades of activism, it explores the relationships between anticolonial and anti-apartheid movements in Africa and struggles for justice within the United States.

The Americans we trusted most were those who understood that their civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, for example, were part of the same battle we waged in Africa. We were all working to free ourselves from the bondage of race-based oppression, whether in the form of apartheid in South Africa or the legacy of slavery and racism in the United States. We were part of a worldwide movement that continues today to redress the economic and social injustices that kill body, mind, and spirit. Just as we watched and learned from the continuing struggle within the United States, so too did activists there gain strength from our struggles.

On occasion the work of our American colleagues was indispensable. The economic sanctions bill passed by the U.S. Congress in 1986 is a case in point. Without the decades-long divestment campaign undertaken by university students, churches, civil rights organizations, trade unions, and state and local governments to cut economic ties to South Africa, the U.S. Congress would not have acted, even to the extent of overriding a presidential veto. International sanctions were a key factor in the eventual victory of the African National Congress over South Africa's white minority regime.

This successful campaign demonstrated what can be accomplished when citizens take up their responsibility to help shape U.S. political and economic policy for Africa. This work remains urgent. The post–September 11 world has witnessed an alarming rise in U.S. unilateralism, proliferating areas of instability and armed conflict, a growing gap between the world's rich and poor, and a shocking failure to adequately respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis, which will kill more people in Africa than all the wars for national liberation put together. *No Easy Victories* makes clear that our lives and fortunes around the globe are indeed linked. My hope and belief is that it will inspire a new generation to take up today's challenges.

#### **Preface and Acknowledgments**

t the midpoint of the twentieth century, colonial powers still ruled almost the entire African continent. Apartheid prevailed in South Africa, and segregation in the United States. Within two decades, most African states gained their independence. But both white minority rule in Southern Africa and racial inequality in the United States continued, confirming W. E. B. Du Bois's famous 1903 prophecy that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."

The second half of the twentieth century was the era of the Cold War, featuring the bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. For most political leaders and the wider public in North America and Europe, this conflict was the primary reality defining global politics. Yet the movement for freedom from colonialism and racism grew around the globe, developing into an unprecedented transnational social movement.

At its height, focused on South Africa, it became known as the anti-apartheid movement, and it achieved its most dramatic victory with the fall of apartheid. Yet the movement against colonialism and racism was never concerned only with South Africa. Around the world, anti-apartheid activists saw apartheid as tied to their own particular experiences of injustice. In every country—the United States, Cuba, the Netherlands, India, and elsewhere—activists saw their commitment to abolish apartheid as linked to their vision for the future of their own country.

Of course, the most decisive role in achieving South Africa's freedom was played by the people of South Africa and those of neighboring countries. But the process involved the entire continent and engaged activists outside Africa as well. International institutions provided support to the global anti-apartheid cause, and sympathetic governments, most notably the Nordic countries, offered resources. Cuban troops and military support from the Soviet Union were crucial in checking apartheid South Africa's military power in the region.

American activists also played a significant role, working to halt U.S. support for the apartheid regime. The movement eventually was able to force changes in Washington and on Wall Street that sent a definitive signal to Pretoria that apartheid was doomed. At the height of the conservative Reagan era, in 1986, popular pressure compelled the U.S. Congress to override a presidential veto and impose sanctions on South Africa. At the same time, U.S. corporations withdrew their investments, so that private sanctions reinforced the official ones. Both were the result of decades of political work in the United States involving African exiles and a diverse set of American activists and organizations.

The sanctions signaled an end to international confidence in the apartheid regime. Events then moved swiftly: Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, and democratic elections were held in South Africa in 1994.

The U.S. anti-apartheid movement is commonly seen as having emerged suddenly, with demonstrations at the South African embassy in the 1980s, and as having retired from the scene after Mandela's release in 1990. But that is a misleading picture. There is a long, largely untold history of connections between African liberation and U.S. activism. These links, intimately related to the history of race in the United States itself, preceded and shaped the anti-apartheid movement, and they continue today.

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Drawing on the voices of activists of several generations, *No Easy Victories* explores the history of connections between African liberation and activism in the United States. The story includes solidarity with African struggles for independence in the 1950s, the reciprocal connections between the civil rights struggle in the United States and African liberation, the initiatives of African exiles and visitors, and the complex networks that linked international institutions and activists across both national and ideological boundaries.

The book presents a range of voices and insights that reflect the diversity of the movement itself. While the book includes the better-known narrative of national policy, national organizations, and events covered by the media, our primary focus is on the networks of individuals and groups—local, national, and international—that made the public movement possible.

We have taken the title for the book, and our mandate in exploring this history, from the saying by Amilcar Cabral: "Tell no lies; claim no easy victories." Cabral, who was assassinated in 1973, led the people of two small West African countries in their fight against Portuguese colonialism. His thinking and his example reached across borders, inspiring a generation of activists not only around the African continent but also across the Atlantic.

Like the anticolonial struggles, the movement in solidarity with African liberation can look to hardwork won victories that are worth celebrating. Yet understanding the significance of that history and its lessons for today's activists requires us to take an approach that is neither celebratory nor cynical, and that recognizes failure as well as success. Although the movement won sanctions against South Africa, for example, it was unable to block U.S. support for South Africa's destructive regional wars. And in 1994, the same year that South Africa gained freedom, activists in the United States shared in the broad international failure to respond to the genocide in Rwanda. More generally, the movement built opposition to the most blatant racially defined denial of political rights—colonialism and apartheid—but proved unable to carry that momentum into broader campaigns for the achievement of full political and economic rights.

The victories won by Cabral and others of his generation were real, as was the international convergence that helped bring the downfall of political apartheid. But Cabral also counseled us that "the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children." These benefits have been slow to come. The post-independence era has seen a wide range of experiences around the continent. Great contrasts are evident even between countries closely linked by history, such as Cabral's own Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. The image of uniform failures since independence in African countries is clearly wrong. But for the majority of Africans, the economic and social victories that would fulfill the promise of political independence are still to be achieved.

In this book, therefore, our goal is not only to recall a history but also to spur reflection on how that history can contribute to renewed international solidarity with Africa. As in the decades of the fight against colonialism and apartheid, the primary responsibility for addressing today's challenges lies with people and groups in Africa. But the success or failure of their initiatives will, as before, also be determined by global structures of oppression and by countervailing forces of solidarity.

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Work on this book began in 2003, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA). ACOA, now a part of Africa Action, is a central component of the story. But the book is not a history of this or any other single group. The networks that built the solidarity movement in the United States were linked to several organizations with national constituencies, including the Council on African Affairs in the 1940s, ACOA beginning in the 1950s, and the American Friends Service Committee, the Washington Office on Africa, and TransAfrica, which took on greater prominence in subsequent decades. These networks also included a host of local and shorter-lived groups around the country and in many different sectors of society. It was the cumulative impact that was essential to the victories that were achieved.

The editors and writers of *No Easy Victories* are activists who have been participants in various aspects of this history over several decades. When we began working on this project, we were motivated in large part by our dissatisfaction with existing accounts of the period, which relied largely on images promoted by the media. Entire chunks of history that we knew to be important, and especially the work of behind-the-scenes activists and local organizations that never gained media prominence, seemed to be entirely invisible, even to the few scholars who had begun to chronicle the history.

x No Easy Victories

Of the decades in question, only the 1950s has so far received significant attention from scholars. Other critical areas have hardly been touched by researchers, much less explored in depth. They include U.S. connections to Tanzania and the liberation struggles against Portuguese colonialism in the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as the role of American activists in the anti-apartheid campaign that reached a high point in the 1980s. Existing treatments of the period from the 1960s through the 1990s tap few archival sources and have included only a handful of interviews with activists.

Focusing on the movement itself, we have not attempted to document the broader history of the struggles in Africa, nor to analyze the evolution of U.S. government policies toward Africa. Our aim, rather, is to illustrate the main features of the solidarity networks that played a critical role in this history from the 1950s through the 1990s.

From the 1980s through the current period, right-wing forces have consolidated hegemony over the national agenda in the United States. In this context, the achievement of sanctions against apartheid in the mid-1980s stands out as a singular victory. But it cannot be understood without seeing its origins in an earlier history. Yet that broader context risks being oversimplified or even forgotten. The historical sources are slipping away as activists die or forget the details of campaigns. Most written and photographic records kept by smaller organizations and individual activists, if they are preserved at all, are consigned to moldy basements rather than placed in archives where they can later be found by scholars.

As we approached the writing of this book, the need to preserve this record and tell the stories was obvious. How to accomplish the task was less certain. Given the limitations of time and resources, we knew that the project would have to be a modest one, a mere beginning point, to whet the appetite of readers to know more. We hope it will spur others who were involved to revisit their own files and memories, confirming or challenging what is presented here. Related materials will be available on a Web site (http://www.noeasyvictories.org).

Our process has relied on interviews with a diverse set of activists, many of whom feature prominently in the narrative we present. But it was not our goal simply to substitute a new set of names for those that are highlighted in other accounts. Such an interpretation would miss the point. Rather, we hope to demonstrate the richness and diversity of the history and to encourage future researchers to dig more deeply, both within the networks we cite and beyond them.

As our research proceeded, we were reminded of the fallibility of memory and the limitations of available records. The recollections of direct participants, including ourselves, frequently varied, even on such basic questions as the year specific events occurred. We have done our best to verify and cross-check statements of fact, but we fully expect some details to be corrected by participants or by researchers with access to additional archival material.

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The organization of the volume is designed to highlight a range of voices and sectors of the movement and to show an evolution that was multidimensional rather than linear. Following an overview chapter, chapters 2 through 6 focus on specific decades. A series of shorter vignettes at the end of each decade chapter highlight the role of particular individuals and groups. Both the overview and the decade chapters conclude with the end of the 1990s. A brief afterword looks at what lies ahead in the dramatically changed context for solidarity in the new millennium.

The chapter headings reflect our thinking about the connections between African liberation and American activism. The division of history into 10-year segments is of course arbitrary, and the great majority of the people profiled were engaged for more than a single decade. Nevertheless, there were clear shifts in context that roughly correspond to the decades. Our five writers were asked to portray key features of the decades, drawing on their own experiences and on interviews with other activists.

It is a measure of the scope of the movement that after an overview, five decade chapters, and more than two dozen vignettes, many relevant names and organizations are still left out of these pages or mentioned only in passing. For every person whose role is discussed there are five more, or 10 more, who should be profiled as well. The innumerable local activist groups, church committees, caucuses in professional and academic organizations, student groups, and ad-hoc coalitions of community activists form a web far too complex to document in a single volume. To all the individuals and organizations who are not mentioned in this story but should be, we can only say that we hope you see this book as also reflecting your own experience, and as a catalyst for documenting other threads of the movement for African liberation.

In the radically changed context of a new millennium, the work goes on. There are no formulas for twenty-first-century activism. But there is new thinking and new energy, as movement veterans offer the lessons of experience and younger activists bring their own ideas and motivations for struggle. *No Easy Victories* opens and closes with the voices of six people whose work on Africa has focused on post-apartheid issues. Their brief reflections affirm that the passion for Africa activism lives on, and that a new generation will find the strength and creativity to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

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The editors and writers of *No Easy Victories* are indebted to all from whom we have learned over the course of our involvement with African liberation struggles—a host of friends, colleagues, and comrades past and present, scattered across several continents. We are especially grateful to those who agreed to be interviewed for the book, many but not all of them quoted by name.

For financial support of the research and writing, we especially wish to thank the Stanley and Marion Bergman Family Fund, Betsy Landis, Sue Wootton Minter, and the Samuel Rubin Foundation. The Aluka project provided assistance for obtaining and transcribing interviews. Anthony Bogues, chair of the Africana Studies Department at Brown University, hosted two crucial meetings of the writers and editors, whose locations spanned the approximately 5,000 miles from Hawai'i to California to Washington, DC. Imani Countess, of the American Friends Service Committee, provided support for a video interview with veteran activist Bill Sutherland, as well as consistent encouragement along the way. Others who gave financial support include Marylee Crofts, Margaret De Rivera, Robert Grant, Margaret Holt, Janet Hooper, Carmen and Bruce Johnson, Donna Katzin, Deborah Knight, Haaheo Mansfield, Miracle Corners of the World, Thomas Moore, Linda Moyer, Nancy Myers, Chris Root and David Wiley, Jim Weikart, and Irving Wolfe. The Center for Democratic Renewal in Atlanta provided fiscal sponsorship for the project. Our thanks to all.

The book also benefited from contact with related projects, particularly the African Activist Archive project at Michigan State University (http://www.africanactivist.msu.edu), directed by Richard Knight, and the Aluka digital library project (http://www.aluka.org). The African Activist Archive seeks to identify and encourage the preservation of archives of American activists, both individuals and groups. The Aluka project includes among its initial content areas the history of freedom struggles in Southern Africa, and the project is collaborating with institutions in Southern Africa and elsewhere to compile a digital library. Selected interviews for this book will be included as part of the international component of that library.

In the process of collecting photos within very difficult constraints of time and money, we have benefited from the generosity of dozens of photographers, archivists, and friends. We are particularly grateful to Richard Knight for assistance in locating photographs and to photographer Rick Reinhard for serving as our lead photo consultant as well as contributing a number of his own photographs. The list of others who have helped is far too long to include here. We have provided credits, obtained permissions from photographers, and identified those shown in photos in all cases for which the information was available.

We thank all those who provided invaluable support through their advice and encouragement. Adwoa Dunn-Mouton and Prexy Nesbitt were consistent and indispensable guides. Others who read drafts and provided feedback included Jennifer Davis, Sylvia Hill, George Houser, Nunu Kidane, Chris Saunders, Betsy

xii No Easy Victories

Schmidt, Cathy Sunshine, Evalyn Tennant, Cherri Waters, and readers for the Human Sciences Research Council Press in South Africa and for Ohio University Press.

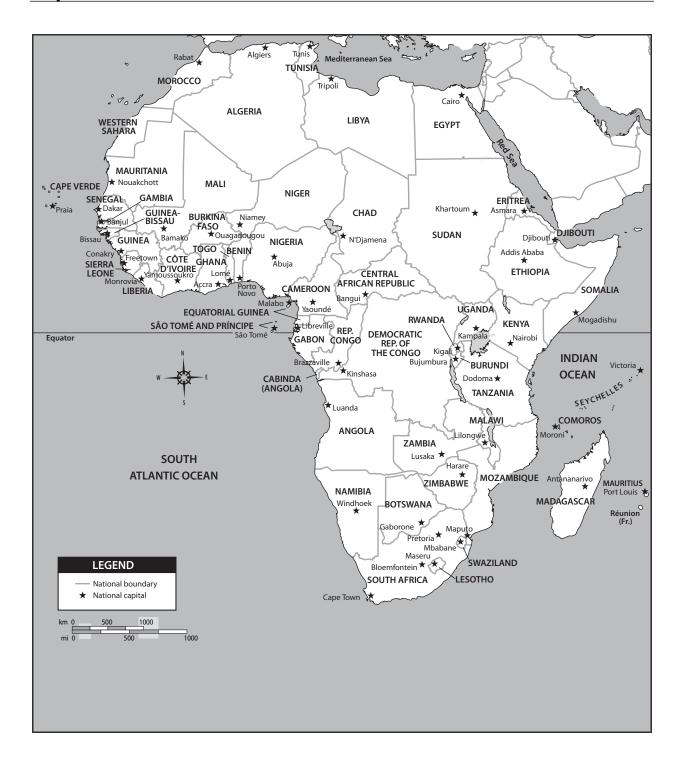
At Africa World Press, publisher Kassahun Checole and editor Damola Ifaturoti believed in the project, kept us moving, and fitted the book smoothly into their production process. Copyeditor Cathy Sunshine brought consistency and readability to the manuscript. Designer Sam Saverance made the history come alive with his creative book design. Our thanks to all. The views expressed in this book are those of the writers and editors, and the editors are responsible for any errors that may remain.

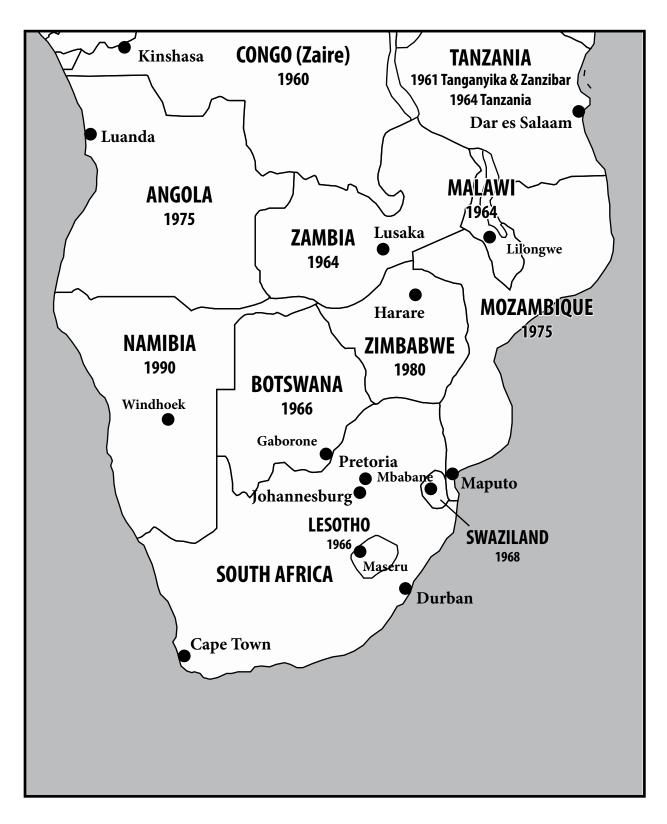
William Minter Gail Hovey Charles Cobb Jr.



Marching to the South African embassy, December 1984. Front row, from left: Roger Wilkins, Andrew McBride, Rev. Rollins Lambert, Walter Fauntroy, Gloria Steinem, Randall Robinson, Eleanor Holmes Norton. Joseph Jordan is in second row on left. Photo © Rick Reinhard.

#### **Map of Africa**





#### **Abbreviations**

AASFU All-African Student and Faculty Union

ACOA American Committee on Africa

ACTWU Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union

AFSAR Americans for South African Resistance
AFSC American Friends Service Committee

AIS Africa Information Service ALD African Liberation Day

ALSC African Liberation Support Committee

ANC African National Congress

ANLCA American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa

APIC Africa Policy Information Center

BCLSA Boston Coalition for the Liberation of Southern Africa

CAA Council on African Affairs
CBC Congressional Black Caucus

CCISSA Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa

CIA Central Intelligence Agency

CIDSA Coalition for Illinois Divestment in South Africa

CORE Congress of Racial Equality

COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions

FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation FLN National Liberation Front

FNLA National Front for the Liberation of Angola

FOR Fellowship of Reconciliation
Frelimo Mozambique Liberation Front
FSAM Free South Africa Movement

HIV/AIDS human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome

ICCR Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility
ICFTU International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

IFP Inkatha Freedom Party

MPLA Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

MSU Michigan State University

NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NSC National Security Council

NSCF National Student Christian Federation

OAU Organization of African Unity

OSU Ohio State University
PAC Pan Africanist Congress

xvi No Easy Victories

PAIGC African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde

PAN Priority Africa Network

PATAM Pan African Treatment Access Movement

R rands

Renamo Mozambican National Resistance

SAC Southern Africa Committee

SALC Southern Africa Liberation Committee
SASO South African Students Organization
SASP Southern Africa Support Project

SCLC Southern Christian Leadership Conference

SDS Students for a Democratic Society

Six PAC Sixth Pan-African Congress SMU Southern Methodist University

SNCC Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

SWAPO South West Africa People's Organisation

TAC Treatment Action Campaign

TANU Tanganyika African National Union

U.N. United Nations

UCC United Church of Christ

UCLA University of California at Los Angeles

Unita National Union for Total Independence of Angola

WOA Washington Office on Africa WTO World Trade Organization

ZANU Zimbabwe African National Union ZAPU Zimbabwe African People's Union



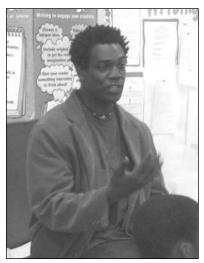
Children demonstrate in support of the people of Namibia at Freedom Plaza, Washington, DC, 1983. Photo courtesy of Joseph Jordan.

Abbreviations xvii



Local folk singers from the Washington area accompany demonstrators at the South African embassy in 1984. From left: Ron Wallace, Luci Murphy, Mike Honey, Steve Jones. Photo © Rick Reinhard.

### Keith Lewis



**Keith Lewis** *Photo by Langston Maynor.* 

was born in Muskegon, Michigan, a small, working-class town. Muskegon Heights, where most of my extended family lived, was almost entirely African American. North Muskegon was almost entirely white. But I went to racially mixed schools, and I played drums and saxophone in the band. So I ended up having experiences that some members of my family had not had.

Growing up, I wasn't especially conscious of Africa. But I knew firsthand about the harsh realities of poverty and the class divide. My mother was a single mother and she worked in a factory, making auto parts. It was the era of Reaganomics, and she struggled to provide the bare essentials for my sister and me. At this point in my life I wasn't yet "political." I didn't think about how our situation related to the wider world, to the long history of racial oppression and resistance.

That began to change during my junior year at Michigan State University. I met other black students—African Americans, a brother from Jamaica—who had Pan-Africanist and black nationalist views. I didn't yet embrace all of it, but they got me thinking. I began to see that years of miseducation and lack of knowledge of our history had contributed to my own lack of self-knowledge. Studying the teachings of Naim Akbar, Marcus Garvey, and Assata Shakur, I began to see the connections between struggles in black America and struggles in Africa. I got involved with the Black Student Alliance and went to Black Power rallies on campus.

After graduating in 1996, I moved to Chicago. I'd been in the business school at Michigan State, being groomed for the corporate route. But by this time I had decided that wasn't for me. I worked first with a program called Public Allies, which trained young adults as community leaders. This was another new experience, because I met young activists from many different backgrounds who were fighting for social change.

At Michigan State, a mainly white institution, there were many non-black students, but I hadn't necessarily interacted much with them. It was when I went to Public Allies that I had a chance to dialogue with folks from all different walks of life, talking about race, class, gender, sexual orientation. That expanded my world view. I learned about the issues that other people, beyond my own black community, were facing. Connecting with them, I joined a social justice struggle that cut across racial, geographic, and gender lines.

Now, in 2007, I'm an educator, an activist, and a father. I work as a counselor at Little Village Lawndale High School in Chicago, helping create a multicultural learning environment. The students at the school are about 70 percent Latino, mostly of Mexican origin, and about 30 percent African American. They come from racially homogeneous neighborhoods and elementary schools, so it's a challenge for them to come together.

2 Keith Lewis

I'm part of a group called Solidarity not Charity, which is contributing to the rebuilding of New Orleans after Katrina. We facilitate dialogue among young people of color from Chicago, New Orleans, and the Bronx. African American and Latino youth come together to discuss their common problems of displacement, criminalization, and lack of education, and to understand each other's histories and struggles.

For me and for many other black Americans, there's so much about our own past that we just don't know. We have a lot of history that's been stolen, history that we never were taught. I've been fortunate—I've had people who've challenged me to look beyond the surface, to seek out more about our connections to Africa and Africans in the diaspora. I've studied ancient Egypt, learned about the struggles in South Africa, about what happened in Liberia, the genocide in Rwanda.

I visited Senegal and Gambia for a month in 2004. There was no particular mission—I went to observe, learn, and make connections. And I had some rich dialogue with folks there about relationships between African Americans and Africans on the continent, about our perceptions of each other and where those perceptions come from. I'm planning a trip to Ghana soon.

So many people in this country, including black Americans, have an image of Africa as a distant, alien continent, a place of famine, disease, and despair. Those issues exist, of course, but having gone to Africa, I know that many other things are happening there too. I saw that as black Americans, we can contribute to the development of Africa from an economic and social standpoint. But I also realized that historically, culturally, socially, there's much that we don't know. There are many opportunities for us to learn and connect.

In my work with youth, I try to dispel some of the untruths. About famine in Africa—a land rich in resources—I ask: Why does it exist? Where does it come from? Those are the kinds of questions I raise.

When I think about the issues facing black communities in the U.S. and abroad, I realize that "there's nothing new underneath the sun." We have to connect with the history of struggles that have preceded our own. Though apartheid has been dismantled in South Africa, it provides a historical context of racial segregation and struggle. Racial and class isolation exist within many American communities today, leading to disunity and hatred. If the lessons of the past go unlearned, history will continue to repeat itself right before our eyes.

# Erin Polley



**Erin Polley** *Photo by Mario Quezada.* 

as a cocktail waitress. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life next. Then President Bush invaded Iraq. As the bombs fell over Baghdad, I went downtown to join the march against the war and was arrested along with several hundred others. In jail I met all these amazing people, and we went to court together and stayed in touch. I found myself a part of a community that was actively working for change around the world. Soon I found a job doing antiwar work at the American Friends Service Committee office in Chicago. So, you might say I fell into activism.

That fall I enrolled at Columbia College Chicago, where Prexy Nesbitt and Lisa Brock were teaching. I had gotten to know Prexy through AFSC, and he encouraged me to take his African history course. I worked with Lisa in an independent study on Cuba, but it turned into an independent study on the world.

Both of them encouraged my interest in Africa, and they gave me opportunities to become part of their work. Over long lunches and tireless meetings at school, they taught me to use history as a way to understand racism, colonialism, and culture today. I learned about Ella Baker and Helen Joseph. And I learned about Prexy's and Lisa's own lives as activists. Their commitment to the anti-apartheid movement and to teaching people about Africa inspired a new kind of activism in me, a 22-year-old white girl from the Midwest.

I became more aware of the racism happening around me every day. I grew up in Indianapolis, but my family was originally from rural Indiana and Oklahoma. They were pretty apolitical, involved in the Southern Baptist Church. Growing up, I wasn't particularly conscious of racism. And I think that's one of the big things Prexy taught me. We were talking about our families one day, and I commented that I really didn't see much racism when I was growing up. He asked me pointed questions about the diversity of people who lived on my street, the diversity of people who were in my classrooms. I started to realize that even though there were not overtly racist things being said at my dinner table, I was experiencing a different kind of racism, in a white, exclusive, suburban world.

By my second year at Columbia, I was filling my schedule with classes on African art, literature, and history. Most of my free time was spent hunting for South African music, watching films about Africa, and reading the histories of people like Nelson Mandela and Albie Sachs. I became fascinated by postcolonial Africa and the liberation struggles.

In August 2006 I joined a group that visited South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. I met activists in all four countries. Even though I'd done a lot of preparation for the trip, my experiences com-

4 Erin Polley

pletely changed my view of Africa. I met young Zimbabwean men my age who'd been banned from studying at the public university after they protested tuition hikes. I met descendants of the Herero in Namibia who have been struggling for the world to recognize the genocide their people suffered under German occupation. I visited the Hatcliffe informal settlement in Harare, where 6,000 people settled after their homes were bulldozed by the government. In each new place, we started an incredible cross-continental dialogue.

I'm now working full-time at AFSC as an antiwar activist and attending Columbia College with a full-time load. I don't sleep much! I hope to finish my degree next year, with a major in cultural studies and a minor in black world studies. I don't know yet what I want to do. I'm thinking about graduate school, but I also plan to continue my work as an activist. I do know that Africa has changed who I am and how I view the world. My interest is in being an ally of people who are working for change in their countries, rather than being somebody who is there to save them.

# Dara Cooper



**Dara Cooper** *Photo courtesy of Dara Cooper.* 

Tho am I? We grow our entire lives trying to answer that question! What I know so far: I am an activist, organizer, student, educator, writer, and passionate priestess of Shango, the Yoruba deity guiding social justice, among many other things.

Activism is my life. I worked with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and the Pan African Treatment Access Movement (PATAM) in Johannesburg, South Africa, while I was completing my graduate studies in community development. In 2006 I became the national organizer for a campaign to defend political exile Assata Shakur, who's now in Cuba, against unjust charges of terrorism.

The spirit of activism comes from my mother, a beautiful black nationalist and Yoruba priestess. It also comes from my grandmother, a savvy teacher and union organizer who was once the target of McCarthyism. From both of them I learned the lesson that every injustice can be fought, and the people can win.

My introduction to liberation movements was through the antiapartheid movement in the 1980s. I remember going to rallies as a child and hearing about the parallels between Jim Crow and apartheid. I remember boycotting international corporations—I still refuse to use Shell gas or purchase Liz Claiborne to this day. I remember meetings with Africans born on the continent, African descendants, and supporters, all working in solidarity. The movement wasn't based on pity or charity but on justice. We understand that our individual freedom only lies within our collective liberation.

As an undergraduate at Ohio State University, I was an organizer with the African Student Union. I was a spokesperson for a successful eight-day sit-in protesting racist administrative policies and demanding support for OSU's Black Cultural Center and Office of Minority Affairs. I also worked to support the Communication Workers of America's campaign to secure living wages and improve health benefits for custodial and health care workers at OSU. Later I worked with groups in Chicago, especially Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. I attended the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004 as one of their representatives.

My work in South Africa with the Treatment Action Campaign involved research and reporting on HIV treatment rollouts across the continent and assessing their treatment literacy program. TAC has successfully combined research, advocacy, and organization of HIV-positive people to take action for themselves. It has protested against big pharmaceutical companies and taken on the South African government itself, demanding that antiretroviral and other treatments be available to all who need them. With PATAM, a continent-wide coalition in which TAC is a leading participant, I helped with research and with coordinating an eight-day training on HIV virology and treatment.

6 Dara Cooper

During my time at TAC I was fortunate to participate in a TAC-sponsored protest. After the long and successful battle to have the South African government commit itself to an HIV treatment rollout plan, TAC focused on monitoring the government's progress. But the government was withholding information, so TAC filed another lawsuit against the government for denying information to the public.

The morning of the case, TAC led a rally down the street from the court-room and held a press conference. Members spoke about living with HIV and their struggles to access treatment and information. They danced and sang their legendary South African *toyi-toyi*. I could never capture in words the camaraderie I felt in the midst of this demonstration. TAC eventually won the suit and the government was ordered to pay a settlement and commit to making information more accessible and transparent. It would be difficult to imagine such a victory for a community organization here in the U.S.

After returning to the United States, I worked with an aid agency to improve laboratory testing and monitoring of HIV/AIDS in Southern and Eastern Africa. Visiting and working in Ethiopia, I learned that it isn't enough to try to help; you also have to confront the paternalistic structures that often undermine the goals of helping communities.

In my current job I focus on one particular instance of injustice, the injustice against Assata Shakur. She was shot by police on the New Jersey turnpike in 1973 and convicted of murder despite evidence that she had never fired a gun and was wounded while holding her hands above her head. The U.S. government has offered a million dollars for her capture. In working on Assata's case, I also try to educate people about the broader, intersecting issues, such as the position of women and the role of the prison-industrial complex.

For me, all these issues are connected. While over 39 million people are living with HIV, Third World governments are being forced to cut social services, including health care. The devastation and death that result deserve to be called genocide.

One of the problems with much of the activism and discourse around Africa is disregard for history. If we're serious about debt cancellation, we have to recognize the exploitation that helped create the debt in the first place. How can we understand the disparities of resources available to Africans without understanding colonization? How can we call U.S. and European countries "donors" when much of the wealth they possess was created by exploiting the labor and resources of the very continent they are claiming to help? How can we not acknowledge this? Does history have a cutoff point where we no longer have to consider previous injustices?

As we fight today's battles, we need to understand where those injustices come from. We need to see ourselves as part of a long lineage of freedom fighters and draw inspiration from battles won.