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Nicholas Grant

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Dora Tamana: travel, home and the transnational politics of African motherhood

Nicholas Grant 

Department of American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersectional politics of Dora Tamana from the 1940s to the early 1980s. A key figure in the anti-apartheid movement, Tamana's activism was deeply informed by her own health, as well as the physical well-being of her family and community. Drawing on her own personal experiences and losses, she carefully constructed a militant and uncompromising politics of African motherhood that grappled with the violence of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. This emphasis on health, care and kinship also crossed borders, forming the basis of Tamana's Black international politics which were shaped by the international women's movement and her travels in Europe, China, Mongolia, and the Soviet Union.

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Introduction

Life in the small village of Gqamakwe was hard, but Dora Tamana remembered it with affection. The rolling hills, grassland and harsh beauty of the Transkei – on the Eastern Cape of South Africa – helped forge her politics, instilling within Tamana values of kinship, care, and education that she held onto throughout her life. Born in 1901 to Minah and Joel Ntloko, into a decade of imperial violence and plunder, both her family and community shared their knowledge of how to survive. At home, her mother and father taught her how to read and write, while educating the young Dora on how to best look after livestock. Both of her parents, she recalled, “had pride in their eldest daughter.”¹ As a young girl, she would travel to the nearest town of Idutywe to sell produce from their small garden so the family could “buy sugar, coffee, shoes and material ... to make dresses.” Although the cost of schooling meant that she left formal education aged eleven, Tamana noted how the process of learning was never simply limited to her two-room local mission school. She remembered

CONTACT Nicholas Grant  n.grant@uea.ac.uk

¹Dora Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, “Dora Tamana Life Story,” n.d., The Simons Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town, Folder R1.9, 1.

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how, throughout her childhood, “Intelligent women taught me how to look after new born babies... and feed the baby,” adding that later, “Looking after all my sisters when I came from school to our home taught me how to cook and clean the house... On Saturday I had to wash my dress with clay ready for Monday to go to school.”²

Tamana sketched out these memories of how her family responded to the economic precariousness of African life in a letter to her long-time friend and comrade Ray Alexander in the early 1970s. As this testimony makes clear, her upbringing was marked by state neglect and hardship that underlined the importance of kinship ties between Black South Africans – within both the individual family unit and the broader community. Indeed, the material stresses that colonialism and segregation placed upon individuals, families, and community networks directly informed Tamana’s move into organized politics in the 1930s. Working with groups such as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the African National Congress (ANC), and the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), she formulated an intersectional politics of care that insisted that women needed to be at the heart of the struggle for African liberation. Throughout her life Tamana made visible and confronted the daily indignities faced by Africans, becoming a powerful voice of resistance. Specifically, she constructed a militant and uncompromising politics of motherhood that she used to claim space within South Africa, while simultaneously connecting the struggle against segregation and apartheid to international movements against colonialism, capitalism, and gender inequality.

The historian Meghan Healy-Clancy has documented how South African women have long embraced a broad understanding of kinship that drew upon “discourses of home and family to envision, and to enact, new forms of national and racial allegiance.”³ Building on work by Nomboniso Gasa, Shireen Hassim, Zine Magubane, Cheryl Walker, Julia Wells, and others, she shows how Black women publicly constructed motherhood as a powerful political identity in order to challenge race, gender, and class exploitation throughout the twentieth century.⁴ Promoting the “shared moral economy” and public political authority of motherhood, African women worked tirelessly to expose the violent impositions of the state in the domestic sphere while simultaneously making it clear that their lives were inseparable from the fate of the nation as a whole.⁵ Tamana was one of a number of twentieth century female leaders who harnessed the symbolic power of motherhood to center African women in the struggle against white supremacy.⁶ Indebted to this existing scholarship, this article explores the embodied physicality of Tamana’s politics of African motherhood. It shows how she focused on her own health and the well-being of her family to

²Ibid; Walker, *Women and Resistance*, 12–3.

³Healy-Clancy, “Women and the Problem of Family,” 453.

⁴For scholarship on the politics of motherhood and resistance in South Africa, see: Gaitskell and Unterhalter, “Mothers of the Nation,” 58–78. Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together*, chapter 7; Gasa, *Women in South African History*; Hassim, “Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics in South Africa”; Hassim, *Women’s Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*; Magubane, “Attitudes towards Feminism among Women in the ANC,” 1980–90; Walker, *Women and Resistance*; Wells, “Maternal Politics in Organizing Black South African Women”; Wells, *We Now Demand!*

⁵Healy-Clancy, “The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women,” 845; Makana, “Motherhood as Activism in the Angolan People’s War,” 356.

⁶Makana, “Women in Nationalist Movements.”

expose apartheid as a gendered system of racial control.⁷ By emphasizing her experiences of ill health and the devastating personal losses she suffered, Tamana offered a powerful proto-feminist critique of both racial capitalism and settler colonialism – one that makes clear the vital intellectual and intersectional contributions African women made to challenging white supremacy in South Africa.

Of central importance to Tamana's political thought was the right to occupy space and exert control over one's own mobility. The physical location of her home, the need to move to find work and survive, as well as the ability to form community networks and political solidarities, were all integral to efforts to challenge white settler rule.⁸ Tamana refused to be told where she could live, work, or build a family. This was a radical stance to take as the state moved to control how space was inhabited and navigated through the implementation of pass laws, segregated housing, and a migratory labor system all designed to exploit African workers and dislocate families.⁹ However, at the same time as she claimed physical and metaphorical space for herself, her family, and community within South Africa, Tamana was also defiantly mobile. Whether it was moving to find employment, traveling to participate in political meetings, or even leaving the country to publicize the struggles of South African women to a global audience, Tamana repeatedly flouted government edicts to stay put and be silent. By embracing a militant and mobile politics of motherhood, she was able to construct and engage with multiple geographies of resistance.

Dora Tamana's activism was simultaneously local, national, and global. Her vision of African motherhood was felt: it was both corporeal and deeply personal, but it was also expansive. Tamana connected the stresses and strains that had been placed on her own body – that had decimated her own family and the families of countless Africans – to both the national liberation struggle and the global politics of the cold war in the era of decolonization. In the process, she forged a maternalist critique of both racial capitalism and settler colonialism that is still deeply relevant in post-apartheid South Africa today.

Cape Town and communism

Tamana's early years in the Eastern Cape were thrown into disarray by the Bulhoek Massacre, which saw the government murder nearly 200 African members of the Israelite Church on the 24th May 1921. Led by the preacher and prophet Enoch Mgijima, the Israelites had been building a religious community in the village of Ntabelanga as they awaited the end of the world. The South African government viewed the settlement as an illegal occupation of white-owned land and were alarmed by reports that Mgijima was promoting the "seditious" idea that Africa belonged to the Africans.¹⁰ Tamana's father and two of her uncles were amongst those who were killed at Bulhoek and, unsurprisingly, the incident features heavily in her surviving biographical writing. Rooted in a much longer history of violent white settlement and

⁷Healy-Clancy, "Women and Apartheid."

⁸Healy-Clancy and Hickel, "On the Politics of Home," 17.

⁹Magubane, "Attitudes towards Feminism among Women in the ANC," 997–89.

¹⁰Edgar, "The Prophet Motive," 401–22; Edgar, *The Finger of God*.

land dispossession, these events made the desire of the white government to forcibly remove Africans from their land viscerally clear, while also further underlining the dire political and economic situation Black communities faced in the early twentieth century.¹¹ For Tamana, this was a key formative experience, one that illustrated how the state deliberately targeted African spaces and communities for destruction.

The next stage of Dora's life further exposed how violence, displacement, and economic fragility governed Black South African life. Following the death of her mother, just a couple of months after Bulhoek, she and her sisters were forced to go to live with her aunt in Queenstown, about seventy miles to the Northwest of their village.¹² In 1923, Dora married John Tamana – himself a former Israelite who was then working in a private house as a domestic servant. The couple had four children in Queenstown, but three died after succumbing to starvation and tuberculosis. Dora tried to supplement John's meager income by collecting thatching grass from the surrounding hills to sell in local markets, leaving her surviving child with her young sister.¹³ By 1930, tired of the desperate working and living conditions they faced, the couple decided to leave for Cape Town in search of work, driven by "the hope that our children might have a chance to survive" in the city.¹⁴ This migration to Cape Town speaks to the large scale displacement of rural African communities in this era. The kinship networks that Dora remembered so fondly in the village of Gqamakwe had largely been eradicated, while the daily struggle to live in Queenstown further demonstrated the power that the white state held over both land and African labor. The shattering personal losses she suffered in this period were the material consequences of a "logic of elimination" that ripped Africans from their ancestral lands and destroyed lives.¹⁵ Indeed, Dora makes it clear that the decision to move to the city was about the literal survival of her children and family. As the historian Robin D.G. Kelley has observed of white settler colonialism in South Africa, "They wanted the land and the labor, but not the people—that is to say, they sought to eliminate stable communities and their cultures of resistance."¹⁶ It was this deeply felt relationship between settler colonialism and the extractive politics of racial capitalism that shaped Tamana's anticolonial thought.¹⁷ Fusing the "personal" and the "political" – the mind and the body – she dedicated her life to challenging these structures by reasserting the familial, kinship, and community ties as a vital part of the struggle for African liberation.¹⁸

In Cape Town, Dora and John Tamana joined thousands of African migrants who had been drawn to the city to fulfill the economy's insatiable demand for labor

¹¹For work that offers an overview of the conditions faced by rural Africans in the early twentieth century, see: Cavanagh, "Settler Colonialism in South Africa: Land, Labour and Transformation, 1880-2015," 293–6; Curry, *Social Justice at Apartheid's Dawn*, chapter 2; Beinart and Delius, "The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913," 667–88; Edgar, "The Prophet Motive," 401–22.

¹²Rosalynde Ainslie, "Dora Tamana." *Spare Rib*, September 1975, 10; Dora Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 2–6.

¹³"Hamba Kahle - Dora Tamana," *Sechaba*, October 1983, 30–2.

¹⁴Ainslie, "Dora Tamana," 10.

¹⁵Cavanagh, "Settler Colonialism in South Africa"; Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 387–409.

¹⁶Kelley, "The Rest of Us," 269.

¹⁷On racial capitalism, see: Legassick and Hemson, *Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa*; Robinson, *Black Marxism*, esp. 10–28.

¹⁸For a powerful discussion of the relationship between motherhood, citizenship, and anticolonial politics see, Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation*, 135.

during South Africa's rapid industrial expansion in the 1930s. The war accelerated this process, with the number of Africans working in manufacturing increasing by almost 120 per cent between 1935 and 1945.¹⁹ However, while a clear need for workers brought many to the city, wages remained painfully low as Africans struggled with housing shortages and crippling high rents. Most new arrivals to the city faced a basic struggle for economic survival.²⁰ Shortly after arriving in Cape Town, John first found work as a laborer in a timber yard and then, eventually, as a driver and the couple moved to Langa township – about eight miles east from the city, on the Cape Flats. Tamana remembered this as a time of great economic insecurity as the couple struggled to find work and pay rent, noting that,

My husband looked for a job. He was nearly four months without work, and I had somehow to find something for the children to eat every day. Langa Administration hired him as a driver, but he had to work so hard for that £3 a week that he gave it up, and looked for another job, up and down, up and down. We couldn't pay the rent, so we were put out, and moved to town again.²¹

Dora and John had five children after moving to the city, and while all of them survived infancy, the structural inequalities they faced meant it was still difficult to provide stable housing, food and basic care. Indeed, it was this ever-present struggle to maintain and provide for her family – a communal struggle that underscored the imperial power that violently disrupted African lives – that informed Tamana's move into organized politics. At this time, she noted that she often walked “round and round Cape Town, passing groups of meetings in the [Grand] parade and in the location, speaking about how to free themselves from the oppression.” At first, she commented that “I was not quite sure what they were saying, speaking about how the people of South Africa lose their lands and the pass laws which were the chains of slavery.”²²

By the late 1930s, however, this initial curiosity and uncertainty had given way to active campaigning, as Tamana began to regularly attend meetings and forge connections with activists who spoke at the Grand Parade – Cape Town's main public meeting ground located between City Hall and the train station.²³ She gravitated toward the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), who held public meetings at the parade every Thursday lunchtime, getting to know prominent members such as Moses Kotane, Johnson Ngwela, Cissie Gool, and Ray Alexander.²⁴ This was a key era for the CPSA as they defended the rights of African workers through their union work and engaged in local subsistence struggles that directly addressed issues related to housing, rents, and food.²⁵ While its official membership levels never exceeded 3,000, the CPSA's anti-fascism and self-stated belief in racial equality fused with their local

¹⁹Bonner, “African Urbanisation on the Rand between the 1930s and 1960s,” 115–29; Gillespie, “Containing the ‘Wandering Native,’” 502–3; Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 118–9.

²⁰Bozzoli, “Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies,” 139–71; Fortescue, “The Communist Party of South Africa and the African Working Class in the 1940s,” 486.

²¹Ainslie, “Dora Tamana,” 10.

²²Dora Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 7.

²³Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 171–2.

²⁴Rosenthal, *They Fought for Freedom*, 15.

²⁵Fortescue, “The Communist Party of South Africa and the African Working Class in the 1940s,” 487–90.

campaigns to engage the African population, especially in urban areas.²⁶ For Tamana, the communists seemed to be working to change the conditions that she and thousands of Africans faced as they struggled for survival in the city. Her political engagement with the CPSA reinforced her critique of the relationship between white supremacy and capitalist exploitation, while also providing the opportunity for her to expand her political vision beyond the borders of South Africa.

In 1938, after a series of financial setbacks and amidst a battle with alcohol, John Tamana left his family. A year later, Dora moved to Bloulevi – an informal “pondokkie” shack settlement amongst the sand and shrubland of the South West Cape Flats.²⁷ Characteristically, Tamana saw the move further away from the city as an opportunity to claim space and for community building. “We are going to do something for ourselves here,” she asserted, “The air is fresh. We have a tap to share with our neighbours. We could even grow something.”²⁸ Over the next few years, Bloulevi served as the base for her activism as she sought to make a material difference to the lives of those around her. As the Second World War began, Tamana increasingly threw herself into political organizing.²⁹ She officially joined the CPSA in 1942, and served as an executive member of the Cape Flats Distress Association (CAFDA) – a group which described itself as “Cape Town’s Conscience,” dedicated to improving living conditions for the African and colored communities located between Table Mountain and False Bay. CAFDA’s insistence that the “root of almost every family problem has lain in deplorable housing conditions” not only resonated with her own material circumstances, but also her vision for African liberation.³⁰ At this time, she was also an executive member of the Cape Town’s Women’s Food Committee, an organization that pressured local authorities to provide adequate supplies “so as to see that everyone had their share,” while also targeting merchants who hoarded food for profit.³¹ The food committee had links to both the trade union movement and the CPSA, and helped establish structures and networks that would later inform the anti-apartheid struggle.³²

Tamana’s work to provide housing and food for both her family and community was also connected to the issue of childcare. At a CPSA demonstration calling attention to the dire housing conditions endured by the African and Colored communities, she first heard a speaker talk about the system of creches and nursery schools that had been established in the Soviet Union. This proved to be a revelatory moment – one that clearly illustrates how international politics influenced Tamana’s local activism. As she recalled in 1948, “I spoke to the women that we must form a creche, that

²⁶Lodge, “Secret Party: South African Communists between 1950 and 1960,” 433–434.

²⁷Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 173.

²⁸Rosenthal, *They Fought for Freedom*, 13.

²⁹Walker, *Women and Resistance*, 76–84.

³⁰CAFDA: *Cape Flats Distress Association - Sixth Annual Report 1949*. 1949, South African Institute of Race Relations, Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand., AD1715-14-4-3-2.

³¹Dora Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 7; Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 177. Tamana was also a leading figure in the Cape Town Housewives League, which among other things, led efforts to challenge increases in the cost of food and pushed the local council to offer subsidies. For an example of this work, see: “Housewives Tackle Havenga,” *Advance*, 6 August 1953, 4.

³²Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*, 141; Walker, *Women and Resistance*, 80–84; “Interview with Ray Alexander.” *Sechaba*, April, 1984, 3–5.

the women who are working, their children can be cared for in the crèche.”³³ She first started a nursery in her own home, taking on twenty children and using soap boxes as makeshift cots.³⁴ Through persistent lobbying and strategic fundraising, she eventually won approval from the authorities to set up the Blouville Nursery School with space for forty children.³⁵ Later, in the early 1950s, she led the effort to set up a school in the community – building a hall and classroom for thirty students out of ironed out petrol drums.³⁶ Tamana insisted that as a mother it was her right to care for her family, but that this should not mean she should be unable to work. Indeed, the right of African women to control and be paid a decent wage for their own labor was directly linked to their ability to provide for their children. By focusing on the issue of childcare, she openly ascribed value to the gendered labor of African women, while constructing a system and institutions that would allow them to take on waged work and provide for their families’ as they navigated the scarcity of the Cape Flats. The construction of a creche and school at Blouville was deeply political work. It was a defiant response to the settler colonial processes that separated Africans from their land, decimating both family and community structures in order to exert control over Black labor.³⁷ Tamana reclaimed space in Blouville, boldly asserting her right to the land and building institutions that would protect her family and her neighbors from the viciousness of the state and the unchecked forces of racial capitalism.

Challenging apartheid at home and overseas

In 1955, the left-wing Cape Town based newspaper the *New Age* reported on Tamana’s nursery school in Blouville. Emphasizing how the institution “has brought joy to a large number of people,” the article noted that the children were now jubilant – “such a lot of nice toys to play with, such a lovely sandpit. And good food, too.” The parents were happy as well, content in the knowledge “that our babies are cared for while we have to go to work” and would have “Such a good start in life.” Finally, Tamana herself was elated as she had realized her vision and had helped create “a bright oasis in one of Cape Town’s worst pondokkie areas.”³⁸

This joy, however, would prove to be fleeting. In May 1948, the National Party (NP) won power from the United Party of Jan Smuts in a narrow election victory. This triumph for Afrikaner nationalism radically altered the racial landscape of the country, as segregation, already the norm, became rigidly enshrined as government policy.³⁹ In part, the NP’s shock electoral success was driven by white anxiety over increased Black migration to South Africa’s cities and specifically the economic fear that they would have to compete with Africans for work. In response, the government wasted little time implementing legislation that sought to further regulate the mobility of the African, Coloured, and Indian population. The Group Areas Act (1950) gave

³³Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 8.

³⁴Ainslie, “Dora Tamana,” 11.

³⁵“Creche on the Cape Flats,” *Guardian*, 2 February 1950; Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 175–7.

³⁶Ainslie, “Dora Tamana,” 11.

³⁷Kelley, “The Rest of Us,” 269.

³⁸“Nursery School For Retreat,” *New Age*, 23 June 1955, 6.

³⁹Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919–36*, 177.

specific places a racial designation, while the Natives Act (1952) made it mandatory for all “non-whites” to carry passes. White control over the Black population was extended by the implementation of legislation such as the Bantu Authorities (1951) and the Natives Resettlement (1954) acts, which were aimed at the “retribalisation” of the African population in rural areas and provided the legislative framework for the state to forcibly remove Africans from urban spaces.⁴⁰

The *New Age* piece juxtaposed the happiness Tamana had created on the Cape Flats with the bleak future that Black South Africans faced under apartheid. While Blouvlei nursery school was a source of pride and hope for the community, its distinctiveness was also viewed as “an indictment of our Government, which makes no effort at all to supply the people with the basic amenities of life.” Nursery schools, it reminded the reader, “at present come to the Non-European people, when they come at all, as a charity and not as a right.” Making clear the link between the politics of care, institution building, and resistance, the article noted that the only way to end poverty in South Africa was to “smash apartheid.” Concluding in optimistic fashion that “the Freedom Charter will provide that in the South Africa of the future creches, nursery schools and full education will be the right of all.”⁴¹

Tamana felt the consequences of this political shift acutely. In 1952, the government amended section ten of the Group Areas Act to make it much more difficult for Africans to prove their right to permanent residency in urban areas.⁴² The Native Laws Amendment Act determined that only Black South Africans who had been born, lived and worked continuously in a town for 15 years, or had been with the same employer for 10 years had the right to remain. While she could prove her residency in Cape Town for this length of time, it was clear that her life on the Cape Flats was increasingly perilous and subject to the whims of the apartheid state.⁴³ Furthermore, Tamana’s unrelenting political work had made her a target for local police and state officials who monitored her as a key figure in the anti-apartheid movement.

Following the rise to power of the NP, the African National Congress (ANC) moved toward a political strategy of mass-action. Galvanized by the militancy of the decade, members of the ANC’s Youth League (ANC-YL) established a Programme of Action in 1949 that committed the organization to a strategy of active boycott, strikes, and civil disobedience. This political shift led to the 1952 Defiance Campaign, directed by the ANC and South African Indian Congress (SAIC), which saw more than 8,000 protesters arrested for openly defying apartheid laws. Women were at the forefront of these protests from the beginning, often spending weeks in prison after breaking pass laws and entering “whites only” spaces.⁴⁴ Tamana served as the secretary of the local branch of the ANC and went door-to-door encouraging people to attend demonstrations and to volunteer to defy the new laws.⁴⁵ Throughout the early 1950s, she also led the resistance against efforts to forcibly move Africans from

⁴⁰Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994*, 36–64.

⁴¹“Nursery School For Retreat,” 6.

⁴²Lee, *African Women and Apartheid*, 19–20.

⁴³“Police Reign of Intimidation Against Cape Africans,” *New Age*, 25 November 1954, 6.

⁴⁴Walker, *Women and Resistance*, 131–2.

⁴⁵Rosenthal, *They Fought for Freedom*, 26–7.

settlements on the Western Cape. The issue of passes – and specifically the NP’s move to force them on African women in 1952 – was a key mobilizing factor that fueled civil disobedience throughout the decade. Having vigorously challenged earlier efforts to extend passes to women (which had long applied to African men), this renewed attempt to further control women’s movement and labor was met with fierce resistance.⁴⁶ Tamana reflected the dismay and anger many African women felt when she addressed an ANC sponsored meeting on the issues of passes in 1953. “This is something that touches my heart,” she told the assembled delegates, “Who will look after our children when we go to gaol for a small technical offence - not having a pass?”⁴⁷

The specific issue of passes was taken up most forcefully by the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), a multiracial organization founded in April 1954, “To bring the women of South Africa together, to secure full equality of opportunity for all women, regardless of race, color or creed: to remove social and legal and economic disabilities; to work for the protection of the women and children of our land.”⁴⁸ Tamana addressed FEDSAW’s inaugural conference at Johannesburg’s Trades Hall. She described how, “In the Cape, the Council brought in passes in a crooked way” that was deliberately designed to break up families through the targeted removal of African women from urban areas. She emphasized the lack of amenities and high cost of food and water in Blouville and the surrounding areas, adding that, “The mothers and children were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food. Women must unite to get their own government.”⁴⁹ Alongside Ray Alexander, she spoke to the need for a “Charter of Women’s Rights” that outlined the federation’s political vision and exposed apartheid as a gendered system of racial control.⁵⁰ Embracing the political language of motherhood, the charter stated that,

We women share with our menfolk the cares and anxieties imposed by poverty and its evils. As wives and mothers, it falls upon us to make small wages stretch a long way. It is we who feel the cries of our children when they are hungry and sick. It is our lot to keep and care for homes that are too small, broken and dirty to be kept clean. We know the burden of looking after children and land when our husbands are away in the mines, on the farms and in the towns earning our daily bread. We know what it is to keep family life going in pondokkies, shanties or in overcrowded one-room apartments. We know the bitterness of children taking to lawless ways, of daughters becoming unmarried mothers whilst still at school, of boys and girls growing up without education, training or jobs at a living wage.⁵¹

⁴⁶Kimble and Unterhalter, “‘We Opened the Road for You, You Must Go Forward’ ANC Women’s Struggles, 1912–1982,” 18–28.

⁴⁷Ainslie, “Dora Tamana,” 11.

⁴⁸Hilda Bernstein and Ray Alexander, “Draft Constitution: Federation of South African Women,” 1954, Federation of South African Women Records, Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, University of Witwatersrand, Aa1, 1.

⁴⁹FEDSAW. *Inaugural Conference Proceedings and Speeches*. c 1954, AD1137 Federation of South African Women Records, Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand, File Ac1.5.3, 5.

⁵⁰FEDSAW. *R. Alexander Presented the Women’s Charter; Dora Tamana Spoke to It. The Charter Was Adopted Unanimously - Women’s Charter Draft*. c 1954, AD1137 Federation of South African Women Records, Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand, File Ac1.5.4; Hassim, “Texts and Tests of Equality,” 10–12; Walker, *Women and Resistance*, 160–4.

⁵¹FEDSAW. *R. Alexander Presented the Women’s Charter; Dora Tamana Spoke to It*.

The “Women’s Charter’ formally articulated Tamana’s own lived experiences and political worldview. While FEDSAW’s emphasis on traditional notions of the family and care could be exclusionary and were not without their limitations in terms of their idealization of the family unit, this was a proto-feminist vision that reflected Tamana’s own insistence that women bore the brunt of apartheid, and as a result, should be at the forefront of the African liberation struggle.⁵² This required both cooperation with and compromises from men. As the charter insisted,

This intolerable condition would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of a large section of our menfolk to concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves. We shall teach the men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and in practice.⁵³

Through FEDSAW, Tamana worked with an interracial group of women including Alexander, Ida Mtwana, Bertha Mkhize, Lilian Ngoyi, Florence Matomela, Josie Palmer, Sophie Williams, Rahima Moosa, and Helen Joseph to ensure the demands of women were heard within apartheid South Africa. After Alexander was “banned” by the government, Tamana served as the federation’s acting national secretary, while also working with the group to launch local protest movements in Cape Town.⁵⁴ For example, she organized a FEDSAW-sponsored women’s conference in central Cape Town on the 4th December 1954. Focusing on the issue of living conditions and proposed rent increases, Tamana outlined how “Higher rents will cause severe hardship to thousands of people who already suffer misery due to the rising cost of living and low wages,” while insisting that the local city and divisional council “must be made to understand that the housing schemes were built to provide homes for the people and not profits...” Imploring women of all races to attend the gathering, she concluded that local administrators “can find their money elsewhere, but not by taking the food out of our babies’ mouths.”⁵⁵

At a national level, FEDSAW continued the fight against the proposed implementation of passes for African women. In October 1955, a crowd of 2,000 demonstrated outside the Union Buildings as FEDSAW leaders left thousands of petitions objecting to the extension of these laws outside the offices of government legislators.⁵⁶ The following year, on August 9 – now “Women’s Day” in South Africa – over 20,000 women returned to Pretoria – standing in silence outside the government buildings for thirty minutes after demanding to deliver their petition against passes directly to the prime minister, Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom.⁵⁷ The anti-pass protests continued throughout the 1950s, as women set the agenda for

⁵²Healy-Clancy, “The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women,” 843–866; Kimble and Unterhalter, “Mothers of the Nation,” 22–28.

⁵³FEDSAW. R. Alexander Presented the Women’s Charter; Dora Tamana Spoke to It.

⁵⁴FEDSAW. Dora Tamana, National Secretary, Federation of South African Women Circular, 6th November, 1954. Correspondence, AD1137 Federation of South African Women Records, Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand, File Ad1.1.

⁵⁵“Cape Women Fight Rents,” *New Age*, 25 November 1954, 6.

⁵⁶“Mothers Plan Protest Deputation to Pretoria.” *New Age*, 11 Aug. 1955, 6.

⁵⁷Joseph, *Side by Side*, 1–3.

the liberation struggle during the decade.⁵⁸ Working through FEDSAW, the ANC-Women's League and the broader Congress Alliance, Tamana was at the vanguard of the anti-apartheid movement in the 1950s. African women ran campaigns, went to jail, held conferences, and published materials, as they targeted race, gender, and class oppression.⁵⁹

Significantly, FEDSAW also had a global outlook, working with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) to forge transnational solidarities with women overseas.⁶⁰ Made up of affiliate organizations in over sixty countries, the WIDF was a progressive feminist and anticolonial organization.⁶¹ FEDSAW's desire to challenge racism and sexism internationally was most vividly demonstrated by their decision to send Tamana – along with Lilian Ngoyi – to the WIDF's World Congress of Mothers held in Lausanne, Switzerland in July 1955.⁶² This experience was lifechanging for Tamana, providing her with the opportunity to claim the right to move on a global scale, while also reaffirming and expanding her vision of the politics of African motherhood. Her transnational travels demonstrate how the health and physical well-being of women were central to the articulation of Black international thought.⁶³ While overseas, Tamana compared the experiences of women and mothers she encountered to her own life back in South Africa. In the process, she made a vital intersectional contribution to global anticolonial politics that foregrounded the concerns, needs, and political leadership of African women.

Tamana and Ngoyi's travels were both audacious and illegal. In attempting to escape the country, both women tried to stow away under "white names" on a boat leaving Cape Town, defied segregated seating on a plane bound for London with the help of a sympathetic pilot, and finally gained entry to Britain under the pretext that they were enrolled on a bible studies course.⁶⁴ On their arrival they were greeted by the English-born FEDSAW member Helen Joseph. Tamana and Ngoyi spent two weeks in London, where they met the committee of the National Assembly of Women, visited different women's organizations, and had some time to sightsee, before flying on to East Berlin.⁶⁵

FEDSAW's ties with the WIDF placed Tamana and Ngoyi at the heart of a transnational network of socialist, and often pro-communist, organizations that were

⁵⁸"Durban Women Prepare Anti-Pass Campaign." *New Age*, 8 Sept. 1955, 1.

⁵⁹Pam Brooks, "But Once They Are Organised, You Can Never Stop Them," 84–97; Gasa, *Women in South African History*, 207–29; Healy-Clancy, "The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women," 843–866; Magubane, "Attitudes towards Feminism among Women in the ANC," 1980–90.

⁶⁰Joseph, *Side by Side*, 6.

⁶¹McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism," 925–44, Gradska, "Women's International Democratic Federation," 270–278; Women's International Democratic Federation, *That They May Live: African Women Arise* WIDF, 1954.

⁶²Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together*, 180–5; Healy-Clancy, "The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women," 843–66; Walker, *Women and Resistance*, 100–3.

⁶³Here, I am influenced by Dawn Y. Curry's assertion that we can "unearth the micro-psychosomatic feelings of everyday Black internationalism by exploring the 'self.'" *Social Justice At Apartheid's Dawn*, 245.

⁶⁴Lilian Ngoyi, *Typescript of the Draft Autobiography*. nd, A2551 Lillian Ngoyi Papers, Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand, A2, 7–10; Caine, "The Trials and Tribulations of a Black Woman Leader"; Berger, "Ngoyi, Lilian."

⁶⁵Naomi Shapiro, "I Tasted A New World And Won Confidence For Our Future': Says Dora Tamana, African Woman Leader on Her Return Home from Overseas." *New Age*, 1 September 1955, 7.

committed to anti-fascist, feminist, and anticolonial politics.⁶⁶ As such, both women should be seen as vital African voices within a broader network of radical Black international feminists who argued that the concerns of Black women were integral to the global struggle for self-determination and human rights in the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁷ The WIDF's ties with Moscow provided the opportunity for further travel and a plan was hatched for Tamana and Ngoyi to spend time in China, Mongolia, and Russia, before returning to Switzerland for the World Congress of Mothers in the summer.⁶⁸ After visiting factories, worker accommodation, kindergartens, homes for the elderly, and medical facilities in East Berlin, they embarked on a four day journey by plane to Peking.⁶⁹ Shortly after landing, Tamana was taken ill. Although this setback caused a slight disruption to their itinerary, it also proved to be a transformative moment as it provided an opportunity for her to witness first-hand the medical care on offer under communism. "Wherever we went, a doctor was there to meet us," she recalled. "They could not have looked after me better ... It was preventative treatment. They stopped me from getting more ill."⁷⁰ When she was feeling better, she joined Ngoyi on a tour of a maternity ward. There, she marveled at the care and pain relief midwives and doctors provided to pregnant women, regardless of their social or economic background. "This home is not a special place reserved for a few lucky people. It is available to all. It is too wonderful," she commented, adding, "One woman told us she felt no pain at all. In no time her baby was born. Another had labor pains for about half an hour – and that was considered a lot. We women usually suffer for a day, a day and a half."⁷¹ Tamana compared giving birth to and struggling to raise children in white supremacist South Africa to what she witnessed in China. While their travels were carefully managed by the government and WIDF affiliates, she began to see the country as a model for political development that the nationalist struggle in South Africa should aspire to.⁷² As she noted after her trip, "The aims of our Women's Federation are to get creches for our children, hospitals and clinics for our people. My experience of hospitals and doctors overseas gave me a clearer picture of what we are working for. I saw for myself how it should be."⁷³ As she traveled, Tamana emphasized the physical consequences of white supremacist rule in South Africa. In contrast, she constructed the medical care she received and witnessed in China as markers of revolutionary possibility, the material result of a society ideologically committed to redistributing land, labor, and property. This was an inspiring

⁶⁶de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations," 547–573; Gradskova, 270–28.

⁶⁷Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 2-3. Indeed, Tamana's challenging of masculinist articulations of nationalism/internationalism are reminiscent of Claudia Jones's arguments in 'An End To The Neglect of the Problems of The Negro Woman,' *Political Affairs*, June 1949.

⁶⁸From a Special Correspondent. "World Conference of Mothers: Four South African Delegates." *New Age*, 7 July 1955, 6.

⁶⁹After returning home, Tamana wrote movingly about her experience visiting an East German orphanage. Comparing this to the situation for African children at home, she noted. "Our children are orphans. When I was overseas in East Germany I visited an orphanage where children are kept if their parents are sick or in jail. Children up to 14 years of age are looked after there. We should have these things in South Africa, even if they are only a drop in the ocean." Dora Tamana, "We Must Not Keep Quiet," *New Age*, 15 March 1956, 2.

⁷⁰Shapiro, "I Tasted A New World And Won Confidence For Our Future," 6.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China*.

⁷³Shapiro, "I Tasted A New World And Won Confidence For Our Future," 6.

vision, one that again struck at the heart of the logic of settler colonialism and the ways in which racial capitalism sought to exert total control over the body and labor of the African population. These experiences helped Tamana develop a global vision of African motherhood, one that centered her own health, the health of the community, and the politics of care. As she toured communist China she advanced a powerful critique of the material, personal, and physical violence of racial capitalism, self-consciously positioning her own body as both a marker of oppression and potential site for liberation.

Tours like these were a central part of the Communist Party's (CCP) efforts to position China as being at the center of the global struggle against imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy.⁷⁴ Indeed, it was Mao's belief that foreign visitors, rather than the Chinese government, were best placed to promote the country as a beacon of anti-capitalist modernity within the broader struggle for "Third World" liberation. Tamana and Ngoyi's journeys were part of these propaganda efforts, which also served as a tool to obscure the CPP's repressive political practices at home.⁷⁵ However, this does not mean that Tamana's first impression and excitement was politically compromised. The Chinese revolution was a real source of inspiration and hope for anticolonial struggles taking place around the world.⁷⁶ Specifically, Mao's emphasis on the redistribution of land, property, and power resonated transnationally, offering a revolutionary model that Tamana and Ngoyi took seriously as they worked for the liberation of Black South Africans who labored precariously in the cities and struggled for survival in the reserves. For Tamana, Mao's China was a beacon of transnational anticolonial solidarity across racial lines. Evoking what the historian Nico Slate has referred to as a politics of "colored cosmopolitanism," she proclaimed, "The Chinese are a wonderful people. It was as though they were all one, all united ... I know that the Chinese are Non-European people. That gave me more confidence that we Non-Europeans here in South Africa can fight for our rights and get them."⁷⁷ Tamana's travels reinforced her view that families and communities were both the drivers for and markers of revolutionary change. Speaking directly with women of color overseas and witnessing firsthand the transformation of social structures and networks of care made it seem possible that political liberation could happen at home. As she asserted when thinking back on her time overseas, "When I saw all these things, different nations together, my eyes were opened and I said, I have tasted the new world and won the confidence of our future, wonderful, great experiences of my life; came back to my birth country."⁷⁸

From China, Tamana and Ngoyi went to Mongolia – where they toured a university and theater – before heading to Moscow. Tamana was once again taken ill, but still managed to visit the mausoleum located in the Red Square to see the embalmed bodies of Lenin and Stalin. She arrived back in East Berlin exhausted from her travels and, due to her ongoing health worries, spent a further 21 days in hospital. Sadly, her

⁷⁴Frazier, *The East Is Black*, 6; Gao, *Arise Africa, Roar China*, 32.

⁷⁵Frazier, *The East Is Black*, 11, 29–30; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 15.

⁷⁶, *Radicals on the Road*; Ho and Mullen, *Afro Asia*.

⁷⁷Dora Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 8; Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*.

⁷⁸Dora Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 8.

declining health meant that she was unable to attend the World Congress of Mothers as planned. Ngoyi, however, did make it to Lausanne and presided over the conferences' second session, delivering its opening address to just over a thousand delegates.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, while Tamana was deeply disappointed that she was unable to make it to Switzerland, she did draft the address she was scheduled to deliver at the Congress and this document is invaluable in terms of providing a sense of the way in which she personally theorized the struggle against apartheid in South Africa as part of broader international movement for race and gender equality.

In her speech, Tamana positioned herself as both a witness and translator, emphasizing how her personal experiences were crucial when it came to educating others on the exact nature of racial oppression in South Africa. Noting that the kindness she had received on her travels had been directed at her not as an individual, but due to people's general knowledge of the racial situation in South Africa and her status "as a member of an oppressed people", she stated,

Yet although you know much about my country and have a warm feeling for my people, you cannot really feel the oppression as we feel it. Even when you read books about us, you cannot really understand what it is to be a black or brown person in South Africa.⁸⁰

Her comments again underline the importance of Black South African travel in the early years of the international antiapartheid movement.⁸¹ While Tamana makes clear the impossibility of fully knowing the intimate thoughts and feelings, oppressions and struggles that were part of her life and the lives of her community, she privileged her own physical mobility and the opportunity to forge interpersonal networks across borders as a vital means of developing a global understanding of apartheid. Characteristically, she sought to do this by telling her own story. As she noted, "Let me try to tell you a little about my country and I shall try [to] do so by talking about myself."⁸² Again, Tamana's lived experiences – her upbringing, her travels, her family life, her losses, her physical deterioration, her community organizing – were a way of telling an international audience everything they needed to know about South Africa, the material and ideological structures of apartheid, and the politics of the national liberation struggle.

Tamana went on to address her life in Blouvillei, detailing the conditions that were endured in the shack settlements, and describing how the pass laws destroyed families through forced removals, arrests, and imprisonment. "Our country is truly a prison house," she wrote.⁸³ She decried the lack of access to education and decent employment opportunities, engaging with the language of motherhood that was at the heart of the gathering by explaining that, "We mothers will sacrifice much to make this possible, but it is very difficult because our wages are so small and education costs much money."⁸⁴

⁷⁹Lillian Ngoyi, *Typescript of the Draft Autobiography*. nd, A2551 Lillian Ngoyi Papers, Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand, A2, 12–14; Berger.

⁸⁰Dora Tamana, *Speech: WIDF Conference*, 1955. The Simons Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town, Folder R9.3.2, 1.

⁸¹For two excellent recent studies focusing on the travel and exile experiences of Black South African women, see: Lundin, "Now Is the Time!," 1–18; Sandwell, "The Travels of Florence Mophosho," 84–108.

⁸²Tamana, *Speech: WIDF Conference*, 1.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

Tamana's draft speech concluded with her detailing the mass civil disobedience campaigns of the 1950s, which she deliberately placed in the context of the cold war and decolonization. Taking aim at the white supremacist "logic" of apartheid, she declared,

The Government say that we Africans are backward and primitive. Well, I don't quite know what they mean. I wonder whether you think the I am backward or primitive. But, I am like the rest of my people, we know that we suffer and what we want is to end our suffering. If it is backward to want good health, a home that is happy or to want freedom and education, to wish for opportunities for our children and peace for everyone - then I suppose we must be classed as backward.⁸⁵

Tamana made it clear that this was a global struggle, commenting that, "But we are not so backward as to be ignorant about what is taking place in the World today." Drawing on her affiliation with the CPSA as well as her recent travels, she added,

We know very well that there are some countries on our side. Countries in which the people are really free because they have governments that represent the people. These countries want to live in peace with the rest of the world and do not like to see human beings treated as slaves, as we are treated. Such countries are our friends and we are pleased when they speak up for us. We know that when our government critiques these countries, it is because they speak the truth and want to help us in our struggle for freedom.⁸⁶

Tamana condemned countries who refused to speak out against apartheid and who instead chose to embrace the vehement anticommunism of the white settler government. She wrapped up her planned address by reaffirming the commitment of FEDSAW to join hands "with all organizations fighting for democratic rights for full equality irrespective of race and sex" and hailed the recently passed Freedom Charter. "On behalf of our mothers, on behalf of our delegation," she proclaimed, "I salute you all. AFRIKA!"⁸⁷

Tamana's time overseas was integral to her development of a clear Black international consciousness that insisted that the struggle against racism and sexism in South Africa could not take place solely within nationally-constrained isolation.⁸⁸ As she professed in the pages of the *New Age* upon her return to South Africa, "From all parts of the world I visited I bring this message to my people: "We have millions of friends overseas who are with us, who understand our struggle for freedom and who are on our side."⁸⁹ Tamana's overseas travels produced a sense of revolutionary possibility, bringing her into contact with inspiring political models that could inform the struggle to dismantle racial capitalism and settler colonialism in South Africa. Her experiences also illuminate the embodied and deeply felt nature of Black internationalism. Released from the confines of the apartheid

⁸⁵Ibid, 4.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid, 5.

⁸⁸Blain and Gill, *To Turn the Whole World Over*, 13; Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists*, 2. For other excellent recent studies of Black women's internationalism, see: Blain, *Set the World on Fire*; Byrd, "Black Women's Internationalism from the Age of Revolutions to World War I"; Farmer, "Black Women's Internationalism: A New Frontier in Intellectual History"; Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*; Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany*; Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation*; Swan, "Giving Berth: Fiji, Black Women's Internationalism, and the Pacific Women's Conference of 1975"; Walsh, "'Betwixt and Between': Juanita Harrison's Black Internationalist Practice."

⁸⁹Shapiro, "I Tasted A New World And Won Confidence For Our Future," 6.

state, Tamana acted as a political and cultural translator, drawing explicitly on her own physical and deeply intimate experiences to promote the politics of African motherhood on the global stage.⁹⁰

For a racist government acutely aware of its image in the world and committed to zealously shutting down dissent, Tamana's transnational political vision represented a threat. The South African government had passed the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, which forced the CPSA underground and effectively made it illegal to engage with any international organization that was judged to be "promoting communistic activities." Indeed, the Act was so broad that it enabled the banning of individuals or organizations deemed to be instigating, any political, industrial, social or economic change in the Union by the promotion of disturbances or disorder.⁹¹ Tamana, who was of course no stranger to state harassment, was met by the Special Branch upon landing in Johannesburg.⁹² Back in Cape Town, she was followed by the police, who subsequently stepped up their harassment of her by repeatedly demanding she carry a pass and disputing her right to remain in Blouvillei. In October 1955, she was issued with a banning order that demanded she resign from both FEDSAW and the ANC-Women's League and not attend any political meetings for five years.⁹³

The apartheid state did not relent in their pernicious targeting of Tamana over the next few years. In response to sustained anti-pass protests and in the aftermath of the mass murder of sixty-nine unarmed protesters at Sharpeville in the Transvaal, the government declared a state of emergency. Tamana was amongst those who were rounded up and arrested. She ultimately spent four months and twelve days in prison.⁹⁴ Upon her release, local authorities forcibly removed her from Blouvillei and relocated her to Nyanga on the Cape Flats, which had been designated as an African area. She referred to the location as a "place of persecution," noting sardonically that "When I returned from Jail after the state of emergency ... I found myself in another jail."⁹⁵ Tamana lost the community, including the creche and school, that she had built up at Blouvillei but again she could not be silenced.⁹⁶ Indeed, in April 1961 – from Nyanga – she led a deputation to the ministries of Finance and Agriculture to protest an increase in bread prices. She took this opportunity to educate ministers on the struggle for subsistence, land, and employment in the Cape. "Mrs. Dora Tamana said that in the past the Africans could produce their own food on the land," the report noted, "but now their land had been taken away and they were being forced to come to the cities to work for starvation wages. The officials, it appeared, did not know anything about the land problems of the African people."⁹⁷ Again, amongst the harassment and hardship she faced, Tamana continued to make visible the material

⁹⁰On the political power of intimate politics in imagining a world after apartheid, see: Sandwell, 'Fantasy States: Nationalism, Intimacy, and Transgression in South African Women's Political Memoirs.'

⁹¹Suppression of Communism Act. Act No. 44 of 1950.

⁹²Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 11.

⁹³Rosenthal, *They Fought for Freedom*, 34.

⁹⁴Tamana, Letter to Ray Simons, 11.

⁹⁵Dora Tamana, "Nyanga - Place of Persecution." *New Age*, 9 Mar. 1961, 2.

⁹⁶Dora Tamana, "Protest At Removals," *New Age*, 30 August 1956, 2.

⁹⁷"Protest Against Bread Price Increases." *New Age*, 20 April 1961, 7.

inequalities that underpinned the apartheid system. She showed how apartheid intruded into every facet of African life. The anti-apartheid struggle was never just about the right of citizenship, or to vote – as important as these things were. It was a much broader struggle for human rights and survival. It was a deeply personal struggle about the right to build a home, a family, a community. For education, opportunity, wages, and land.

Tamana remained in Nyanga for the rest of her life. She continued to resist and organize during the era of “high” apartheid, and in 1963 was arrested again and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment under the Suppression of Communism Act.⁹⁸ After her release, she was defiant, saying that she was pleased to have had the opportunity to serve her sentence as there was “so much that she could teach the women she met inside.”⁹⁹ As she entered her sixties, Tamana was the primary carer for her ten grandchildren and one great grandchild. She also learned that her son Bethwell, who had joined the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in the early 1960s and fought in the Rhodesian Bush War, had been captured and sentenced to death by the white settler government.¹⁰⁰ Following an international outcry after the Smith regime’s execution of several freedom fighters in 1968, Bethwell’s sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.¹⁰¹ Tamana made it her mission to visit her son every Christmas, her maternal visits serving as a powerful symbol of intergenerational struggle.

Conclusion

On Saturday 4th April 1981, around three hundred people assembled in the St Francis Cultural Center in Langa on the Cape Flats. Traveling by minibus, car, and train from all over the Western Cape, they descended on Cape Town for the first conference of the United Women’s Organization (UWO).¹⁰² That Dora played a leading role in the formation of the UWO is significant. She demanded that the assembled crowd speak out loudly against apartheid and the hardships they endured:

You who have no work, speak. You who have no homes, speak. You who have no schools, speak. You who have to run like chickens from the vultures, speak. We must share the problems so we can solve them together. We must free ourselves.

“I opened the road for you. You must go forward!” she declared, adding, “Women, stand together, build the organization, make it strong!”¹⁰³ Prior to this meeting, Tamana had organized a rally in central Cape Town in the summer of 1978, which had established the United Women’s Association – a forerunner to the UWO.¹⁰⁴ Later, she opened the annual conference of the Food and Canning Workers Union in Paarl, and was celebrated around the country as a living symbol of

⁹⁸“Hamba Kahle,” 31.

⁹⁹Ainslie, “Dora Tamana,” 13.

¹⁰⁰Bothwell Tamana - Obituary.” *Sechaba*, c 1984.

¹⁰¹Ainslie, “Dora Tamana,” 13.

¹⁰²Fester, “Women’s Organisations in the Western Cape,” 45–61.

¹⁰³“Mayihlome!” *Mayibuye: Journal of the African National Congress*, Number 9, 1984, 7.

¹⁰⁴“Hamba Kahle,” 31; Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 181.

resistance as the anti-apartheid and women's struggle entered a new phase of regionally focused community struggle.¹⁰⁵

It is clear Dora Tamana's political and intellectual vision survived well in to the late twentieth century, inspiring a new generation in the struggle against apartheid. Indeed, today she is often referred to, alongside many of her comrades in FEDSAW and the Congress Alliance, as a "mother of the nation" – a towering figure whose sacrifice helped make multiracial democracy in South Africa a reality. Given Tamana's embrace of motherhood as a political category, this characterization might seem fitting. This gendered celebration of national liberation acknowledges the importance of her activism. However, it rarely does justice to the scope, complexity, and urgency of her political contribution to the anti-apartheid movement. While she was denied much of a formal education, Tamana was an incisive thinker and political strategist who used her physical experiences to theorize and expose oppression. Specifically, she exposed how African families and communities were targeted for elimination, while making it clear the ways in which gender and racial oppression were entangled in order to exploit Black labor. Indeed, hers was an intersectional politics that foregrounded the experiences of African women to expose and challenge settler colonialism. Alongside her allies in the women's movement, Tamana used motherhood as a political weapon and a key site of activism that confronted the policies of the white settler state by insisting on the right of Africans to not only maintain homes and communities, but to live, work, and thrive in the country of their birth. Her emphasis on the political power of kinship and care also crossed borders, forming the basis of a Black international consciousness that took inspiration from both communism and the women's movement overseas. Engaging with the geopolitics of the cold war and decolonization, she forged transnational solidarities and exchanged ideas that she hoped would aid South Africans in their efforts to dismantle the apartheid system. By claiming the right to settle and the right to move simultaneously, Dora Tamana ultimately advanced a global vision of African motherhood that challenged the South African government's racial construction of space that was designed to keep Africans – and African women in particular – in their "proper place."

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

¹⁰⁵Scanlon, *Representation and Reality*, 181.

Notes on contributor

Nicholas Grant is an Associate Professor of United States History at the University of East Anglia, in the UK. His first book, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945-1960* was published in 2017 with UNC Press. His articles have appeared in the *Radical History Review*, *Journal of American Studies* and *Palimpsest: A Journal of Women, Gender and the Black International*.

ORCID

Nicholas Grant  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7297-665X>

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