In May 1960, less than two months after South African police killed 69 protestors in Sharpeville, a Chicago-based journalist wrote to his Johannesburg counterpart. “We want what the press services are omitting or ignoring.” Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press’ World News Service told Nathaniel Nakasa of Drum, who had witnessed the massacre. “It is our feeling that South Africa represents a key point in the history of black and colored people the world over.”\(^1\) Barnett, who had founded the Associated Negro Press (ANP) in 1919, launched its World News Service (WNS) in January 1960, and by October of that year the WNS was sending wire articles to over 100 foreign papers, predominantly African. In the early 1960s, the ANP also served 74 domestic papers, which included all major black papers but the Chicago Defender and reached 90% of the black press market.\(^2\) This paper explores how Barnett attempted to use the WNS not only to facilitate contact between informants within the repressive regime and journalists of African extraction outside of South Africa, but also to mediate this contact through his lens of racial uplift, in which the transmission of journalistic truth itself comprised a particular sort of anti-apartheid activism.

My preliminary analysis of the Claude A. Barnett Papers at the Chicago Historical Society suggests that the story of Barnett’s coverage of apartheid was in fact one of reversal: originating from African American attempts at African uplift, the axis of diasporic activism dramatically shifted once the South African press recognized its possibilities. In WNS releases from Sharpeville through the press service’s demise at the end of 1963, apartheid operated as a continual counternarrative to stories of African emancipation and ascendancy, reminding African

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\(^1\) Claude A. Barnett, Chicago, to Nathaniel Nakasa, Johannesburg, 9 May 1960, Box 176-3, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago Historical Society (CAB).

and Caribbean journalists of remaining battles. Apartheid, however, was not merely a mobilizing trope, but also, increasingly, a crisis whose resolution demanded its representation. Once Barnett began exchanging information with editors at Contact, a liberal journal integral to the liberation movement within South Africa, its journalists’ sense of urgency amidst post-Sharpeville repression pushed accounts of the apartheid regime into the foreground of WNS releases, despite Barnett’s proclivities toward independent regimes. My exploration of Barnett’s work will expand scholars’ understanding of journalism across the black Atlantic in the early 1960s, revealing a dynamic transnationalism that nationally-centered theories of the black public sphere do not explain. The WNS’ work in South Africa provides an illustrative case of the power and limits of black Atlantic collaborations in the global 1960s.

Diplomatic historians’ accounts of African American internationalism in the Cold War era generally overlook the role of this black diasporic public. Thomas Borstelmann, for instance, notes the familiarity of the apartheid regime, Africa’s “own Deep South,” to American legislators and African American activists and the mutual influence between nonviolent protest strategies in the American and South African contexts, but he does not explicate the means by which activists on both sides of the Atlantic articulated these connections, as such an exploration exceeds the scope of his policy-centered analysis. But because African American newspapers

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and press agencies who attempted to offer African coverage from inside sources—rather than simply reframing United Press International wire reports to suit their audiences—did so on remarkably limited budgets, their networks for information-gathering bear closer examination as sites of creative diasporic collaboration.

The recent wave of historiography on African American transnational activism at the civil societal level, while it illuminates the domestic context in which the WNS operated, tends to accept black American press coverage of African events chiefly as a reflection of African American interests. In her Race Against Empire, Penny M. Von Eschen suggests that the domestic imperatives of the Cold War compelled black American journalists, and particularly Barnett, to renegotiate their relationship with Africa. Her coverage of African American press responses to the early apartheid regime underscores the dehistoricization of black American notions of race and the attendant exoticization of Africa that they typified, and she locates this development both in broader Cold War trends and in journalists’ relations to these realignments. Von Eschen, in fact, explicitly blames Barnett for the diminishing political saliency of African reportage throughout the 1950s, arguing, “Barnett’s powerful position as head of the Associated Negro Press, his new-found interest as a travelogue writer, and his capitulation to the demands of the Cold War go a long way toward explaining the abrupt drop in the coverage of African and Caribbean politics in black American newspapers.” But her overriding emphasis on the demands of domestic Cold War power relations obscures the role of Barnett’s informants in their representation, and Barnett’s key transformation in the 1960s is outside the scope of her study.

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James Hunter Meriwether’s *Proudly We Can Be Africans* treats the black American press as a gauge of popular opinion, useful chiefly for capturing consensus in the black public sphere. In his consideration of African American reaction to the Sharpeville massacre, Meriwether generally brings in black American newspapers to substantiate his appraisal of popular conceptions of the connection between nonviolent protest’s limits in the South African context and the prospects for nonviolence at home. Since he focuses predominantly on the black press’ editorial comments, the question of source never arises—the accounts of Sharpeville to which black American papers respond appear to be the objective products of an international wire service, and the editorial comments reflect the sentiments of a black American community talking amongst itself about the relationship between repression at home and abroad. The crisis of apartheid thus appears more frequently as a trope; while the American Committee on Africa and the African Methodist Episcopal Church collected funds and advocated boycotts, the black press appears to have acted as a lens through which African Americans could relate South Africans’ struggle to their own. But what Meriwether reads as national public opinion about international developments was itself a transnational product, informed by the South African journalistic representations that pushed the bounds of African American editors’ narrative frameworks, even as these editors tried to frame coverage in response to their own ideological agendas and to the dictates of the domestic market.

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8 Meriwether, 190-191.
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Francis Njubi Nesbitt’s *Race for Sanctions*, which attempts to flesh out the work of diplomatic scholars and historians of black American civil-societal transnationalism by studying the anti-apartheid movement in greater depth, self-consciously sets out to focus on South African-initiated resistance strategies as the core of the international movement. Nesbitt also recognizes the centrality of the “communications revolution” in galvanizing activists as, like the internationally transmitted imagery of white brutality in the American South, “the equally horrific images of the Sharpeville and Soweto massacres in South Africa led a new generation of African-American activists to link their struggle to that of the black people in South Africa.”

Nesbitt focuses on how international representations of South African resistance strategies transformed American discourse about apartheid; but the modes by which South Africans attempted to represent themselves remain insufficiently explored.

Comparative historians of the United States and South Africa generally take us no farther in understanding the processes by which Americans and South Africans collaborated to tell the world about apartheid. John Cell’s work, as he notes, “is about white people,” and considers the influence of the American South’s racist infrastructure on the emergent industrial state of South Africa more than the interconnected resistance strategies of the people living under these systems of domination. George Frederickson’s works, while comprehensive in their treatment of

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10 Similarly, scholars of the broader American anti-apartheid movement tend to neglect the agency of South African informants. See Donald R. Culverston, *Contesting Apartheid: U.S. Activism, 1960-1987* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 36-38: Culverston notes the salience of international media representation of the Sharpeville massacre in sparking popular protests and the United Nations’ condemnation, but closer analysis of the terms of Sharpeville’s representation falls outside his scope of inquiry. See also Robert Kinloch Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 63-82: Massie’s otherwise incisive work also makes the leap from massacre, to media coverage, to outrage among political leaders and investors without interrogating the public spheres in which these images were transmitted and received.

national histories, often hold one nation’s past up to the other as a means of illuminating each. As Robert Gregg observes, these comparative approaches reify the national, bypassing the sites at which cataclysmic events force local imaginaries to intersect transnationally.

Literary theorist Rob Nixon provides the most historically grounded account of the processes by which black Americans and South Africans represented themselves and each other under apartheid in his Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood. Fundamentally, Nixon suggests, the apartheid regime enraged African Americans because it violated three tropes central to Americans and to the post-1945 international community more broadly—“it contravened the global impulse toward decolonization, desecrated memories of the Holocaust, and offended the spirit of the Civil Rights movement.” But at the same time that apartheid came to comprise a potent counternarrative in postwar American thought, American culture also came to occupy a powerful and contradictory place in the black South African imaginary, as Drum “plundered many of its images of upward mobility from African-America” without glossing over the nation’s less glamorous aspects. In fact, the dangers of gangsterism in American cities were so engrained that in a sensationalistic October 1951 cover story on Johannesburg’s crime wave,
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Drum ominously called Johannesburg “The New Chicago.”16 In his study of America in Drum’s South African imaginary, Nixon explores the ways Johannesburg journalists took cues from and revamped the work of black American writers, focusing on the interconnections between the renaissances of Harlem and Sophiatown. In so doing, he takes us far toward understanding both the terrain on which popular American-South African transnationalisms operated and the black public sphere which Barnett sought to mobilize and mediate by 1960.

My task, in analyzing the WNS as a transnational public sphere, is to reconcile a multiplicity of historiographic perspectives with the lived experience of a group of black Americans and South Africans who worked to tell the world about the crisis of apartheid in the early 1960s. This paper will engage these historiographic approaches by fusing the most analytically useful components of each, evaluating the WNS’ project in light of the civil-societal transnational activism it deployed and in terms of American and South African journalists’ readings of each other—that is, melding Meriwether’s, Von Eschen’s, and Nesbitt’s transnational activism-oriented schemas with Nixon’s comparative cultural analysis, while remaining mindful of the broader Cold War trends to which Borstelmann refers. Understanding the transnational news network that Claude Barnett endeavored to create also allows us to redefine the black public sphere from a diasporic perspective, to account for the progressive globalization of what Nancy Fraser has called “subaltern counterdiscourse”17 in the post-World War II era in general and the salience of international anti-apartheid discourse beginning with the Sharpeville massacre in particular.

17 Critiques emanating from communities that bourgeoisie civil society has excluded. See Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Social Text 1990, 25/26: 56-80. Page 67.
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My task becomes complicated by the fact that Barnett, in his Booker T. Washington-style conservatism, defies the profile of black transnational activists that scholars have described. Thus the first section of my original research findings will explore Barnett’s reflections on Tuskegee in his unpublished 1965 memoirs, “Fly Out of Darkness,” and in his ANP and WNS reportage. As I read these memoirs at the Chicago Historical Society, I intend to read more widely in the secondary literature to contextualize Barnett’s understanding of racial uplift further. I will then explore the origins of Barnett’s journalistic career at the Chicago Defender, again situating his journalism and memoir in the vast secondary scholarship on that seminal newspaper, which linked prospective migrants from the south with northern jobs, housing, and ideas about racial uplift. Drawing chiefly on the Barnett papers, I will next examine the ANP’s coverage of South Africa before and after coming of apartheid in the context of its broader African reportage, focusing on Barnett’s evolving links with South African journalists at Contact, Drum, and the Bantu World. I plan to read more on the history of these publications to deepen my analysis, as well as to read more articles from these sources. I will treat the changing relationship between the WNS and the South African press temporally, designating Sharpeville as the turning point at which South African journalists’ desperate assertions began to shape the WNS’ reportage.

