In contemporary scholarship, Pan-Africanism is largely studied as a primarily 20th century movement in the English-speaking world. Histories of Pan-Africanism recount the contributions made by intellectuals and political figures from anglophone Africa, the Caribbean and the United States to the “ideas, activities, organizations and movements that, sometimes in concert, resisted the exploitation and oppression of all those of African heritage, opposed and refuted the ideologies of anti-African racism and celebrated African achievement, history and the very notion of being African.” When France is evoked in this history, it is as the site of international exchange where English-speaking Pan-Africanists came into conversation with their black French contemporaries who were affiliated with the Negritude Movement. In this historical account, Pan-Africanism and Negritude are sometimes viewed as synonyms such that “perhaps what has been called Négritude can be considered merely a Francophone cultural form of Pan-Africanism.” The result of this conflation is that the existence of Pan-Africanism in France becomes confined to a narrow slice of time that corresponds to the coining of the neologism Negritude by black students in Paris in the 1930s and the subsequent peak of the movement in the mid-20th century.

Pan-Africanism and Negritude certainly overlap in their affirmation of the histories and identities of people of African descent through literary production and political leadership. There are however also significant differences between the two movements. Notably, the history of Pan-Africanist thought, going back at least to the 19th century with the work of Anténor Firmin, Edward Blyden, Martin Delaney and others, predates the specific articulation of Negritude as a philosophy and literary aesthetic by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Léon Damas, Paulette Nardal, Lépold Senghor and others. Further, where Negritude focused on cultural production, Pan-Africanism extended beyond the milieu of students and intellectuals to include an emphasis on grassroots organizing, particularly by and on behalf of disenfranchised workers. While we may therefore think of Negritude as a specific articulation of broader Pan-African ideals, the linguistic demarcation that situates Pan-Africanism as a primarily anglophone movement and Negritude as its francophone equivalent obscures the fact that African-descended citizens and subjects of the French empire were also key contributors to Pan-Africanist thought and activism before and beyond Negritude.
Joy Hendrickson and Hoda Zaki describe Pan-Africanism as a “loosely knit and sometimes contradictory constellation of ideas, organizations and movements that transcend national borders.” For this reason, rather than try to articulate a working definition here, it is more productive to identify the core tenets of Pan-Africanist thought and to examine the ways that these tenets inform anti-colonial and anti-racist organizing in France. As Hendrickson and Zaki note,

The ideals that distinguish Pan-Africanism include the need for Africa to unify for the greater economic, political, and social good of all Africans; the existence of an African personality; the vital connections between continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora; the necessity to protest racism and to assert the contributions of African civilizations; the need to remove all vestiges of colonialism; and the desire for human dignity. Pan-Africanism therefore envisages liberation from imperial oppression through collective action that encompasses the cultural, political and economic milieus.

The goal of this chapter is to trace the contemporary history of these core elements of Pan-Africanist thought and activism in France in the 20th and 21st centuries. Scholarship that traces the rise and evolution of Pan-Africanism establishes a firm temporal and geographic divide that locates the movement in the African diaspora in the 19th and early 20th centuries and situates it as a primarily continental phenomenon in Africa from the mid-20th century to today. An examination of Pan-Africanism in France, however, challenges this timeline by highlighting not only the movement’s zenith in Paris between the two world wars, but also its continued legacy among black French activists today. To this end, I examine a selection of Pan-African journals published by anticolonial organizations in the interwar period and the ways that their Pan-Africanist discourse continues to be mobilized by contemporary black feminist organizations in response to the particular contours of French imperialism.

This reading highlights the ways that France’s policy of assimilation in the colonial era, today refigured as a national rhetoric of “race-blindness,” contributed to the perception of the metropole as a racial utopia immune from the racism of more visibly segregationist societies such as the United States. I argue that this perception of an egalitarian France played a significant role in shaping how black French thinkers and activists envisioned their place in a global struggle against racism and imperialism. For French people of African-descent who experienced firsthand the realities of French colonial violence and exploitation, working towards the political, economic and cultural liberation of black people worldwide necessitated then, and continues to demand now, reckoning with the racial politics of French imperialism, not only overseas but also in the Hexagon.

**Pan-Africanism in the interwar years**

The 1920s and 30s saw a flurry of anti-imperialist activism in France through the creation of anti-racist organizations by black students and workers. Many of these organizations published periodicals that contributed to the vibrant black press of the interwar years. Among these periodicals, two stand out for their explicitly Pan-Africanist goals, and for the international dialogue they fostered in their pages around the realities of racism in the French empire: *Les Continents* and *La Voix des nègres*. *Les Continents,* was the mouthpiece of the Ligue universelle de la défense de la race noire (Universal League for the Defense of the Black Race), founded in 1924 by Kojo Tovalou Houénou with the aim to
develop solidarity amongst individuals of the black race; to group them for the rebuilding of their native land; to protect them from acts of violence, physical cruelty, or abuse; to combat the dogma of the inferiority of races of color; to assist its members morally and materially.\(^8\)

The Ligue’s stated aims of restoration of land and dignity for people of African descent places it firmly within the Pan-African tradition that Hendrickson and Zaki identify. In its publication, *Les Continents*, the Ligue’s first order of business was to dispel the myth of France as a racial paradise. In one of the journal’s first issues, the celebrated Antillean writer and colonial administrator, René Maran, wrote a scathing response to an article published earlier that year by African American writer Alain Locke. Locke’s essay, “The Black Watch on the Rhine,” appeared in the January 1924 issue of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*. In this article, Locke recounted his observations of the prominent presence of black soldiers in the French army in occupied Germany. That these colonial regiments counted among their number high-ranking officers, particularly sergeants from the Antilles and North Africa, served as evidence for Locke that France had “always traditionally been fair to her colored subjects.”\(^9\) As Locke noted, other European countries had severely criticized France for its use of colonial troops. For example, articles such as E.D Morel’s “Black Scourge in Europe” portrayed African soldiers as hypersexualized “instrument(s) of revenge” unleashed by France on white German girls in the Rhine.\(^10\)

Locke’s response sought to counter these racist claims and therefore emphasized the dignity and disciplined comportment of the colonial troops. This defense of black soldiers, however, ultimately read as praise for a France where all were equal citizens. Locke claimed that the colonial troops he saw in Germany were “not merely French soldiers, they are French citizens, comrades not only in arms but in all the basic human relationships.”\(^11\) Citing the supposed virtues of “French fraternity and democracy,” he went a step further to argue that rather than view the black citizen as “merely a French man who happens to be colored,” France had managed to attain that elusive balance between its universal ideals and the particular cultures of its black citizens, a balance that, as we will see in the subsequent discussion of contemporary anti-racist organizations, remains more myth than reality in France today.\(^12\)

In this idealized vision of France, the colonial policy of assimilation and its attendant narrative of a civilizing mission as the supposed justification for colonial exploitation all but disappear, leaving for Locke’s readership the image of the Hexagon as that racial utopia to emulate. If, as Locke claimed, France recognized the fundamental humanity and equality of Africans, their languages, cultures and religions, then where did that leave Pan-Africanism? Was there a need for France’s colonized subjects to, as Houénéou’s Ligue envisioned, challenge racist discourses of black inferiority and protest the brutality of colonialism?

René Maran’s open letter to Locke in *Les Continents* responded to this question with a resounding yes. Maran argued that the idealized image of France on paper did not negate the racism and discrimination that was the lived experience of the colonized subject: “Speeches and texts — wind and pieces of paper — are no match for this daily reality.”\(^13\) Maran catalogued for Locke the physical and psychic violence perpetrated by France in its administering of its colonies. He condemned the colonial educational system that excised more radical content such as the history of the French Revolution from its curriculum, as well as the metropole’s willful understaffing of healthcare facilities that could not adequately respond to the high number of cases of sleeping sickness. Maran went on to analyze for his American interlocutor what he described as the two faces of France. His reading of the conflict between appearance
and reality is worth quoting in full here because beyond seeking to dispel the myth of racial equality in France, it also highlights the challenges that the pervasive opinion of France’s benevolence posed to the credibility of Pan-Africanist condemnations of French racism. Maran wrote:

First of all, learn, my dear Mr. Locke, that France has two countenances. The one, official, — governmental, if you please — is all smiles and fine pretenses, especially to distinguished visitors. But the smiles turn to mocking chuckles as the stranger turns his back. It is not until many a disillusioning sham has been pierced that one can penetrate the thick and clever and guarded hypocrisy that masks a malevolent system. The other face of France is only beauty and human kindness. Serious, compassionate, fair, she turns that only to the children of her bosom, her citizens, her humble and unsuspecting masses. This true France, whom all who come to see and know love, and love eternally, is not the France of foreign view and foreign policies.¹⁴

Ever the deliberate writer, Maran’s language of masking, concealing and pretense is crucial because it highlights the importance of possessing an intimate knowledge of France as an imperial power in order to truly see and therefore resist French colonialism. Locke’s portrayal of harmonious race relations, overdetermined as it was by European denunciations of the presence of black soldiers, also pegged its understanding of racism to its manifestations in the Anglo-Saxon world. The absence of egregious displays of discrimination against those who were “sufficiently colored to be ‘Jim-crowed’ and ostracized in the American South” signaled to Locke an egalitarian France.¹⁵ Maran’s image of a two-faced France therefore does more than challenge the myth of the metropole’s civilizing mission. By situating Locke as an outsider to these difficult-to-discrim realities of French racism, it stakes a claim for Pan-Africanism in France by emphasizing black French subjects’ intimate, firsthand knowledge of the true nature of imperial France and therefore the unique contributions they were poised to make to the struggle against a global imperialism that was not limited to the English-speaking world but also implicated France in the atrocities of empire.

Although Les Continents was short-lived, it was succeeded by other journals that continued these vibrant and sometimes contested transatlantic conversations in their pages. In January 1927, the Comité de defense de la race nègre (Committee for the Defense of the Black Race), another anti-racist organization formed on the heels of the demise of Houënon’s Ligue, published the inaugural issue of its journal La Voix des nègres. Although contemporary scholarship has largely focused on the journal’s reclamation of the derogatory epithet “nègre,” its explicitly Pan-African aims go beyond this terminology and are best articulated in the Comité’s mission statement. In a forceful declaration that foreshadowed Frantz Fanon’s denunciation of colonialism in The Wretched of the Earth, the journal affirmed that the Comité:

Considering that among the disinherited of the land of Africa; the negro race which constitutes the fifth largest population is the most humiliated of all the human race; that the hundreds and millions of men who make up this race are an immense oppressed world; that all the African nations, annihilated over the course of centuries must stand up and re-flourish in order to reoccupy their place in the council of all the people; considering that experience shows that the emancipation of the negroes will be the work of the negroes themselves, that enlightenment, progress and colonialism are incompatible; that the first principle of human dignity is that it is made for all men; have the honor of
informing you that it has taken the initiative to publish in Paris LA VOIX DES NÈGRES.\textsuperscript{16}

The Comité’s emphasis on African emancipation as part of a broader fight for the liberation of the black race firmly establishes it within the tradition of Pan-Africanism. Its belief in political sovereignty as the only viable path to liberation, also distinguishes it from the Césairean strand of Negritude that sought to reconcile the valorization of black culture and identity with the political assimilation of France’s colonial territories in the Caribbean and South America into the French polity as overseas departments. In subsequent issues, \textit{La Voix des nègres} took this emphasis on political autonomy and sovereignty even further through their radical calls for independence. The Comité’s president, Lamine Senghor, denounced French nationality for black people as simply serving the needs of empire,\textsuperscript{17} and declared France’s colonial policy of assimilation to be morally and materially indefensible.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite \textit{La Voix des nègres’} forceful denunciations of racism in France, its presence in multiple major French cities including Marseille, Nice, Le Havre and Bordeaux and the many black journals that succeeded it and continued its mantle of cataloguing French imperial violence, influential black thinkers and leaders around the world still claimed that the Hexagon was a racial utopia. In August 1928, Marcus Garvey reported on his visit to France to readers of \textit{The Negro World}. The bold and extensive subtitle of his open letter encapsulated what Garvey saw to be the nature of race relations in France: “Finds French Republic Courteous and Fair to Black Men in France, While Maintaining Policy of Oppression in Africa. NEGRO IN FRANCE IS CAREFREE OWING TO LACK OF SPUR TO RACE CONSCIOUSNESS. Warns the Race Against Losing Its Idealism to Build Constructively for Itself.”\textsuperscript{19} Unlike Locke, for whom France was a benevolent colonizer at home and abroad, Garvey presented a clear-eyed view of oppression in the French colonies but continued the erasure of that oppression in the metropole. From his viewpoint, France as a racial utopia had lulled black French people into inaction and had stalled political action towards emancipation. The work of France’s Pan-Africanist organizations remained invisible to Garvey in much the same way that, as Maran argued, France’s true faces remained obscured for Locke. Yet as \textit{Les Continents}, \textit{La Voix des nègres} and their successors such as \textit{Le Race nègre}, \textit{Le Cri des nègres}, \textit{La Dépêche africaine}, \textit{L’Étudiant noir}, \textit{La Revue du monde noir} and others all showed, Pan-African thinkers and activists galvanized anticolonial action on the ground and presented clear evidence of the racism and discrimination that black students and workers from Africa and the Antilles continued to face in the Hexagon throughout the interwar years.

\textbf{Pan-Africanism and afro-feminism in the 21st century}

Although Pan-Africanism in France reached its zenith during the interwar years, the movement did not end with the outbreak of World War II. As Félix Germain has shown in his study \textit{Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946–1974}, Pan-Africanist sentiment among working class black people in France continued in the post-war period. Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, for example, saw in the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) trade union, a platform for activism “to end colonialism in Africa, while fighting to improve conditions for African workers in Marseilles, which he noticed were drastically different from those of the educated black middle class of Paris.”\textsuperscript{20} The decades after World War II were also marked by a series of Pan-Africanist conversations in Bandung, Paris and elsewhere about black art, culture and liberation from
colonial rule. At the first International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956, Richard Wright decried the congress’ failure to include as speakers any of the black women whose monumental contributions to black internationalist literary and political movements have only recently begun to be centered in contemporary scholarship. As Wright noted, “In our struggle for freedom, against great odds, we cannot afford to ignore one half of our manpower, that is the force of women and their active collaboration. Black men will not be free until their women are free.”

Wright’s call for the recognition of black women as crucial participants in the project for collective black liberation finds an echo today in the organization Mwasi: Collectif afroféministe, an organization created in 2014 by a group of French women who identify as African or of African descent.

In many ways, Mwasi has taken up the mantle of their 20th century Pan-Africanist predecessors who challenged French imperialism on two fronts, in the metropole and in the colonies. In their mission statement they declare that their “revolutionary struggles for liberation” take as a point of departure “the experiences of black women living in France in order to produce collective strategies and political analyses.” At the same time, they also present a broader afro-diasporic geography similar to the transnational scope of the Ligue and the Comité. Their specific brand of afro-feminism therefore seeks to “contribute in an important way to the construction of feminist thought be it in France, in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the Caribbean or in the African diaspora.” Mwasi is not merely an implicit inheritor of earlier Pan-Africanist ideals. The organization explicitly identifies its mission as carrying on a woman-centered Pan-African political vision: “Since the dawn of time, African women and women of African descent have fought courageously for their emancipation. Today it is our turn to pick up the torch!” In their book, Afrofem, Mwasi further describes their written production as their “afro-feminist contribution to black and Pan-African liberation.”

If Mwasi’s geographic focus and their emphasis on political activism beyond literary and philosophical interventions echo the work of the Pan-African organizations in interwar France, they depart from the politics of these predecessors in two significant ways. First, their specifically black feminist lens means that whereas journals such as Les Continents and La Voix des nègres featured an almost exclusively male list of contributors, the publication Afrofem centers black women’s collective authorship. In the organization’s writings, Mwasi sheds light on black women’s erasure from the genealogy of Pan-Africanism and contends that black French women “waited neither for the United States nor for the 19th century to fight for the rights of black people and more generally for all colonized people.” In order to counter a historical narrative where all the French women are white and all the black women are American, Mwasi includes on its website a list of foremothers, black French women such as Gerty Archimède, Paulette Nardal and Suzanne Césaire who played crucial roles in anticolonial intellectual and political movements. Mwasi’s Pan-Africanist activism is therefore inextricably intertwined with its goal of redressing the historical erasure and ongoing sidelining of black French women from discourses of liberation. The second critical difference between Mwasi and its predecessors is its policy of non-mixité. Unlike the Pan-African organizations of the interwar years that included a number of white French writers and thinkers as allies and interlocuters, Mwasi reserves a portion of its political action and spaces of dialogue uniquely for women who identify as African or of African descent and enforces its delineation of these spaces as noire and métisse only.

Despite these fundamental differences, Mwasi finds itself contending with the same claims about France’s egalitarian treatment of all regardless of race, that Locke and Garvey put forward in the early 20th century, and that the French state now wields as a tool to
render Pan-Africanism in the Hexagon redundant. Indeed, the most controversial aspect of Mwasi’s political vision, its policy of non-mixité, is, according to representatives of the French government, not only unnecessary in a supposedly egalitarian France, but also illegal because it contravenes the universalist principles of the French Republic as set out in the constitution. For example, in July 2017, Mwasi organized an afrofeminist festival, Nyansapo, at which festival sites were to be demarcated into three zones, one open only to black women, another to black people of all genders and a third to people of all races and genders. Nyansapo drew collective condemnation from a range of actors across the political spectrum, including the socialist mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, the leader of the far-right National Front party, Marine Le Pen and representatives of anti-racist organizations such as SOS Racisme and the Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l’antisémitisme (International League against Racism and Antisemitism, LICRA). The latter organization, unwittingly re-enacting the erasure of black French women from the genealogy of Pan-Africanist action that the Nyansapo festival sought to counter, declared that the American civil rights activist “Rosa Parks would be turning in her grave” at the thought of Mwasi’s practice of non-mixité. In their condemnations of Mwasi’s non-mixed spaces, each of these political actors invoked France’s republicanism as a rallying cry against what they saw to be unwarranted racial separatism. The outcry over Mwasi’s non-mixité reveals the terms on which black people are expected to be present in France by highlighting public space as a key site of contestation in the debate about the compatibility of Pan-Africanism and French republicanism.

There is therefore a clear line of continuity that runs from 20th century claims about racial equality in France to 21st century portrayals of Pan-Africanism as divisive in a “race blind” Republic. Certainly, in many ways, Locke’s and Garvey’s political motivations for lauding France as a racially egalitarian society in the 20th century, differed both from each other’s and from those of Mwasi’s critics. For Locke, France’s supposedly successful integration of colonial soldiers into its army was a testament to the dignity of French people of African descent. For Garvey, France’s apparent inability to see race had lulled black French people into inaction and was impeding the formation of a Pan-Africanist consciousness. For SOS Racisme, LICRA and other French anti-racist organizations whose very raison d’être suggests their ability to recognize racism in France, the Republic’s seductive language of equality continues to exercise its pull, if not as the present reality, then as an imminent reality to be attained by integration into the French Republic. Despite these differences, Locke, Garvey, SOS Racisme and LICRA share the premise that race consciousness, a core principle of Pan-Africanism, is at best superfluous in a country where the Republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity render race consciousness irrelevant.

Like Les Continents and other 20th century Pan-African organizations in France that had to counter the myth of a French racial utopia from other black intellectuals and activists, Mwasi too continues to challenge the disavowal of race consciousness by prominent contemporary anti-racist organizations such as SOS Racisme, LICRA and the Conseil représentatif des associations noire (Representative Council of Black Associations, CRAN). In “The Politics of Race-Blindness: (Anti)Blackness and Category-blindness in Contemporary France” Tricia Keaton shows how anti-racist organizations’ perpetuation of the myth of “race and category blindness” in France ultimately works against their anti-discrimination efforts. As Keaton argues of these organizations,

their emphasis on “‘color’” and “‘diversity,’” as non-racial constructs, is indicative more of how French republicanism expresses its power to delegitimize discrimination termed
“racial” by disqualifying “race,” which also relies upon the consent of the racialized for it to be effective.\textsuperscript{29}

If, as Keaton shows, the refusal of racial identity as “a basis for community formation among ‘Blacks’ in France”\textsuperscript{30} ultimately “inadvertently assists in the cloaking of France’s race-making past,”\textsuperscript{31} the present study also shows the ways that this inaccurate view of race relations in France can disavow race consciousness, a core principle of Pan-Africanist thought. Mwasi’s refusal to decenter blackness in its political discourse therefore continues to stake a claim for the relevance and legitimacy of Pan-Africanism in France.

In the French context, Pan-Africanism continues to be an important organizing principle for activists seeking to counter the enduring myth of a France that does not see race. From the organizations that operated throughout the metropole at the height of the movement in the 20th century to its ideological successors today, Pan-Africanist thought provides a critical and clear-eyed view of French imperialism and its on-going legacy, not only in the former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere, but also in the Hexagon.

Notes

5 Ibid.
8 Boittin, Jennifer Anne, \textit{Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Intervar Paris} (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 81.
12 Ibid.
16 La Voix des nègres, Jan. 1927, 1. 1. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.
17 Ibid.
Pan-Africanism in France

24 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 124.

Works Cited

La Voix Des Nègres, Jan. 1927, 1.