

# Black Women Elected Officials: Advancing Equity Through City and Nation-State Public Diplomacy

By Shearon Roberts

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## Introduction

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris evoked the shared legacy of African Americans and Africans as she welcomed African leaders at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, African and Diaspora Young Leaders forum in Washington, D.C. in December 2023. She pointed to the design of the National Museum of African American History and Culture as a recognition by African Americans of their motherland—"the shape of this building is inspired by Yoruba art from West Africa" (The White House Briefing Room, 2022). She then pivoted to the ways in which she plans to champion advancement and empowerment across the continent in her role as vice president. At the end of March, Harris continued efforts to further the Biden-Harris administration's outreach on the African continent. The visits and forums are part of a wider White House strategy to compete with China's investments and strategic alliances with Africa. Her visit included stops in Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia. However, Harris' visit to Africa differed from current White House trips including one by first lady Jill Biden to Namibia in February 2023, and others by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who visited Ethiopia and Niger in March 2023. In Zambia, she was welcomed by President Hakainde Hilchilema as a "daughter of our country;" in Ghana, President Nana Akufo-Addo welcomed her "home;" and in Tanzania she was reminded that Africa was her "home" (Megerian, 2023). Before her, President Barack Obama's visits to Africa emphasized democratic ideals and state-to-state engagement. In the Biden administration, Harris' office has emphasized people-to-people interactions, addressing shared issues and focusing on initiatives that empower women, entrepreneurs, and young people. As the most powerful Black woman ever elected in U.S. history, Harris' pursuit of public diplomacy at the national-global level is indicative of the frameworks

Black women are pioneering as they rise to elected seats of power across the country and the globe.

This crafting of public diplomatic engagement is intentional. Public diplomacy has been traditionally defined as the direct and indirect engagement of foreign publics, by state and non-state actors, to enhance the image of a nation abroad. This perspective presented here aims to expand conventional definitions of public diplomacy by centering case studies of Black women elected officials within the last decade. In this work, these selected case studies help to advance that public diplomacy can also engage publics around a shared ideal or vision for the world, with or without image enhancement of a nation-state, as the central or ultimate outcome. Certainly, a nation's reputation can be enhanced with effective public diplomacy, but in exploring the efforts to advance Black racial solidarity and to promote Black racial equity, any enhancements to a nation's image is secondary. Why the study of Black women elected officials is relevant in the scope of public diplomacy studies today is because their entrance into diplomatic efforts have traditionally been by appointment and not typically via an electorate or popular vote. Since diplomacy and public diplomacy is still in essence about the use of power, how Black women elected officials wield that power in global engagement is a new phenomenon worth studying.

Therefore, Harris' work with the African continent, is more than merely a symbolic engagement with Africa and people of African descent by the first Black woman Vice President of the United States. Across the globe, Black women are able to reshape and reframe diplomatic engagement, what it looks like and what issues it advocates for, because for the first time, Black women now hold a larger share of elected positions here in the U.S. and abroad than ever before. The power of winning contested elections has resulted

in a generation of Black women elected officials who can authentically, and in their own right, champion Black lives around the world, working within governments to center diplomatic approaches, initiatives, programs and rhetoric that advances equity and social justice.

The advances Black women have made in earning political power, both locally and nationally, particularly from 2015 to the present, corresponds to shifts in diplomatic frameworks across the globe. Their role today in governments, provides credibility to the global call for racial justice. Black women have been at the forefront of racial justice social movements in the 2010s and 2020s and their activism has transcended into the political realm and diplomatic realm. As political actors, Black women elected officials continue to center people first, engaging in public diplomacy that advances racial justice and racial equity.

In this public diplomacy perspective, first, I explore how Black women elected officials are reframing our understanding of public diplomacy from a racialized and gendered approach. Next, I recap how the last decade's racial justice social movements laid the groundwork for Black women's rise in elected positions of power. I then distinguish how elected power provides legitimacy for political actors, particularly in the diplomatic realm, compared to diplomatic appointments. Finally, I explore the ways in which Black women elected officials have mainstreamed the language and actions of racial justice social movements of the last decade in their first few years of elected power both in the United States and across the African Diaspora. I highlight the language, actions, and initiatives championed by Black women elected officials as case study and as an exploration of how racial equity can be advanced among peoples.

This public diplomacy perspective aims to answer how can diverse communities be engaged when political actors reflect the backgrounds, lived experiences and marginalization of the diverse global publics they interact with. I also question how can the ideals of racial justice social movements, specifically in addressing Black lives and the historic oppression of people of African descent, be actualized through public diplomacy efforts. Additionally, this perspective also asks what limits Black women elected officials face in advocating issues of racial justice and equity that may at times conflict or contrast with diplomatic frameworks of the country and leaders they represent.

In revisiting these recent shifts in public diplomacy as a result of the inclusion of more elected Black women into diplomatic spaces, I aim to credit and center Black women as the architects of new forms of public diplomacy that advances racial justice in a modern, contemporary context. I also aim to offer a richer understanding of how diverse communities can be engaged by political actors who at times are representatives of localities and nations, where their own identities are often marginalized, and where the work of equity and justice remains unfinished.

### **Expanding Traditional Public Diplomacy Acts and Actors**

The strategy of reaching “hearts and minds” as public diplomacy scholar Nancy Snow writes, has been deployed at pivotal points in U.S. history, as a central practice of political communication from a global standpoint. From World Wars, to the Cold War and post-September 11, public diplomacy has been an important diplomatic approach for branding “nation image” and for “perception management” (Snow and Taylor, 2008, p. ix).

Public diplomacy, as with all forms of diplomacy, is about power. It is often categorized as an execution of soft power using Joseph Nye's (2009) framework. A soft power advantage occurs "when culture and ideas match;" "how issues are framed in global news media;" and "when a country's credibility is enhanced by domestic and international behavior" (Snow and Cull, 2020, p. 5).

Beginning in the 2010s and reaching a peak in 2020, around the world, Black racial justice movements hit a watershed moment. In the United States, it was first rooted in calling out police brutality but expanded to actions to dismantle persistent forms of systemic oppression. In the U.K. and across the European Union, the Brexit movement and anti-immigrant campaigns, specifically, anti-African and ethnic xenophobia, put Black racial justice and the legacy of colonialism in focus. Black racial justice movements in Latin America and the Caribbean shared linkages with the African continent, connecting the under-development of post-colonial states to the movement for Black racial justice. As a global issue, Black racial justice social movements saw groups of people, within different nation states, who had "culture and ideas" that "matched;" perceived a specific issue—racial inequity, the same, and this context dominated global media both in digital and traditional platforms. Additionally, the rise of conservative governments in the United States, the U.K. and Brazil, for example, meant that many countries lacked "credibility" in how their "behavior" on this specific issue of racial justice was perceived and interpreted by global publics.

However, "credibility," which Snow and Cull outline as an important aspect of soft power, is where this examination of Black women elected officials aims to expand studies on public diplomacy. Both the United States, and its representative government during the Trump administration, lacked credibility on issues of Black racial justice and equity.

Certainly, the Trump administration's language between 2016 and 2020 to describe Black states like Haiti and the African continent further diminished the "credibility" of the U.S. as a moral leader on the treatment and advancement of people of African descent. That the largest election of Black women to positions of power in the United States occurred during this same time period was a significant contrast to what was playing out nationally and globally in terms of the image of the United States.

Certainly, not all political actors who engage in public diplomacy need to be elected, but it matters, in the case of Black women, at this time, that they were elected. It provided Black women elected officials with legitimacy from a voting electorate, in representing communities who identified with the "culture and ideas" that they championed. It certainly allowed Black women elected officials to say, with authenticity to publics around the world, that the Trump administration did not speak for all Americans, and certainly many communities of color. It allowed Black women elected officials to continue, with "credibility" to engage diverse peoples and communities around the world effectively at the local or regional level, even when at a national level, there were tensions with a formal U.S. diplomatic framework during the Trump and Brexit periods.

As Snow points out, scholars of "conventional public diplomacy" often emphasize the "asymmetrical one-way efforts to inform and build a case for a nation's position" (p. 9). However, as the case studies here explore, the inclusion of Black women elected officials often resulted in two-way efforts that built the case for shared empowerment, advancement and mutual respect, without positioning a more powerful nation and its peoples over that of a perceived or assumed lesser one.

And while emphasizing “shared values” is a cornerstone of public diplomacy acts, Snow points to the contributions that intercultural communication and peace and conflict studies have offered in rethinking public diplomacy approaches moving past the marketing and information overload of prior public diplomacy tactics. What occurred in the past is that “bias and distortion ... play a large role in intergroup communication” (p. 10).

But if we are to follow Snow’s 2020 call to rethink public diplomacy as a field, its’ efficacy should include “measuring the communication context of what we are doing, instead of just information-driven effects and outcomes” (p. 10). In citing Seong-Hun Yun’s application of intercultural communication within a public relations context, Snow notes that “relationships with publics provide the best indicator for the effects of excellence in public relations rather than reputation or image” (2009, p 309).

R.S. Zaharna’s studies on engagement of the Arab-Muslim world after September 11 indicate that a “strategic focus” on the current context and historical relationships/ties can also be indicators of effective engagement with publics particularly at a time of nation image-repair. Zaharna writes of the “networked paradigm” that “Washington should attempt to learn how people are connected in order to develop new links” (2005, p. 3). I add here that who is engaging on behalf of diverse communities, and not just as representatives of nation-states, at pivotal moments, is an indicator of how effective public diplomacy acts can be. In the case of this work, elected Black women officials, engaging with publics across the African Diaspora at the height of racial justice advocacy are important variables that enhance public diplomacy acts among peoples. In echoing Snow’s examination of the future of public diplomacy “relationships with publics is still our best predictor of actual

future behavior” and “relationships with publics will act as a buffer if and when future crises occur” (p. 11).

The work of Black women elected officials is also redefining who wields and leverages power and what they can do with that elected power. Conventional power dynamics in public diplomacy was either U.S.-led or U.K.-led, but in this current context, we see public diplomacy efforts being led by Black women elected officials from developing nations and across diverse regions. The example of the Bahamas engaging publics directly in African and Pacific Island nations, bypassing the U.K. and its Commonwealth platforms, is one case of leading from the South, without the West, by a Black woman elected official. Or it could be the case of the first Black women vice presidents of Colombia and the United States who through their official travels give platform to Black and indigenous grassroots and community groups. It can also be Black women representatives in congresses or parliaments in Europe and Black women mayors across the globe, who are developing their own public diplomacy efforts locally and separately from a more centralized, national effort.

What we can learn from Black women elected officials and their approaches to public diplomacy is that they are executing in real time advances in public diplomacy that diplomacy scholars like Zaharna has called for within the last two decades. The pillars of that framework are shared culture and heritage among publics, credibility on the issues both communities face and aim to address, and authenticity around a global issue that cannot be simply packaged through any marketing or informational campaigns traditionally deployed as PD tactics. It is their very unlikely, but welcomed presence in diplomatic spaces that is changing this paradigm.

## **Black Women Firsts in Global Politics**

To begin highlighting how Black women elected officials offer a new lens of viewing public diplomacy acts and actors, we must begin by outlining how their own marginalization in society and in halls of power impacts how they leverage their elections into policy and political acts.

Black women have always been involved in politics, policy making and diplomacy, and their contributions have often been overshadowed and understated in footnotes of histories. The mid-2010s onward marked a historical turn where Black women elected officials stepped out of the shadows and assumed positions of power from heads of municipalities to heads of states. During this period, it was also the first time in history that a self-identified mixed-Black woman joined the most recognizable royal family. These shifts in whose voices punctuated powerful spaces carried a unique strain across the globe. Black women embody the marginalization of both race and gender and it is within this lived experience, they pursued policy frameworks that put those most disenfranchised at the forefront of global conversations.

The rise of Black women elected officials coincides with specific political turns around the globe during the mid-2010s. A re-emergence of anti-refugee and xenophobic politics in Europe, accented by the Brexit referendum in 2016, and the Trump-Putin era of U.S. and global politics (2012 and 2016 to present), in particular, marked a period where global leaders silenced critics, and bolstered autocratic styles of governing. Women and people of color in particular saw the beginnings of attacks on many of their hard-fought civil and human rights. The stripping away of civil rights could be seen through the reversal of major laws by the end of the 2010s. Global ideals that seemed universally agreed upon

by nations also were undermined during this decade, such as the commitment to reducing the impact of nations on climate change, peace-keeping, open-borders, refugee rights, LGBTQ+ rights, the rights of women and children, and poverty eradication. Anti-blackness through systemic racism and state-structured systems in policing, public education, access to education and public resources, became mainstreamed at this time. The global Black Lives Matter Movement at the beginning of the decade grew into a global movement of networks across the Black Diaspora that fought to point out how historical oppression of people of African descent remained in the fabric of most Western societies and accounted for why Black people, the world over, remained impoverished and marginalized.

In their campaigns and in their approach to governing through the middle of the decade and into the 2020s, Black women advanced political frameworks that are rooted in the Black feminist tradition of “lifting as we climb” (Clark Hine and Thompson, 1998, p. 177). They sought global audiences, forged international alliances, and never played small, centering people and community first in shifting political messaging that was oftentimes hostile to the work they were aiming to advance. At times, they remained lone voices when state and regional diplomacy ran counter to their own ideals. What Black women have offered as alternative forms of public diplomacy during the 2010s and at the start of the 2020s, demonstrates that regardless of stature and national politics, it is possible to represent and advocate for a contrasting framework of political ideals at a time when more powerful, and often male voices may hold ultimate power. The examination of Black women’s public diplomacy in the mid-2010s to today demonstrates that those who understand marginalization the most, when given access to seats of power, will engage and connect communities

around shared ideals of advancing a global community that is far more humane, just and equitable.

### **Firsts in the U.S.: From the cities to the White House**

There has never been a Black woman to be elected governor of a U.S. state or to be elected as U.S. president, however, between 2016 and 2022 Black women have run for office in record numbers nationwide, making history in U.S. politics. Black women broke that color and glass ceiling in 2020 when Kamala Harris was elected as U.S. Vice President. Two years earlier in 2018, Stacey Abrams, who was the first woman and first Black woman to lead a party in the Georgia General Assembly, lost her bid for governor by only 1.4 percentage points, making it the closest electoral loss for a race of that scale in recent U.S. political history (Bluestein, 2021). Abrams channeled her loss into grassroots work to register hundreds of thousands of voters and to fight against voter suppression among the working class and communities of color that put her state in play to make Kamala Harris the first Black woman and the first woman to be elected as U.S. Vice President.

Two years into the presidency of Donald Trump, Black women set a record for running for national office during the midterm elections of 2018, and made historical firsts in both local and national races across the United States. The Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers University tracked 468 Black women who ran for office in the 2018 midterm elections (Lockhart, 2018; CAWP, 2022). While only Abrams came closest to securing a statewide win, many Black women made firsts to become mayors of major U.S. cities (See Table 1). Indeed, more Black women were elected to big-city mayoral positions during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles, than in the 1980s and 1990s (CAWP, 2022). During their time in office, Black women mayors advanced

policy actions in global spheres that often contrasted with diplomatic frameworks at both the state and national levels (See Table 1).

The 2020 general elections and 2022 midterms also pointed to a continued trend. Four Black women elected officials joined Abrams in 2022 to declare bids for governor of their states. They were Danielle Allen (Massachusetts); Diedre DeJear (Iowa), Kathy Barnette (Pennsylvania) and South Carolina State Senator Mia McLeod, who became the first Black woman to officially declare a run for the governor of her state (Chamlee, 2021), and finished second place in the Democratic primary.

In national races, roughly 20 Black women declared campaigns for the U.S. Senate in the 2022 midterms, up from 13 in the 2020 general elections (Bowman, 2022, CAWP, 2022). Two races were competitive. Former judge Cheri Beasley ran for the open North Carolina U.S. Senate seat, and U.S. Rep. Val Demings challenged Sen. Marco Rubio for the Florida U.S. Senate seat.

In Congress, the number of Black women serving as U.S. Representatives is at an all-time high (CAWP, 2022). In 2018, Black women secured historic wins in Congressional races in larger numbers, more than any other electoral period in U.S. history (CAWP, 2022). After the 2020 general election, 25 Black women were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives to join the 117th Congress, with two additional Black women serving as non-voting representatives. Since 1968 when U.S. Rep. Shirley Chisholm was elected to Congress to represent New York, only 47 Black women have served in Congress. Therefore, the majority of Black women elected officials to Congress come from this current era. They have won in majority white districts, in Southern and Midwest states, and were the first to do so in two states. They are

introducing important legislature that have not appeared before on Capitol Hill, such as the Black Maternal Health Caucus formed by North Carolina Congresswoman Alma Adams and Illinois Congresswoman Lauren Underwood, who is a registered nurse. Both women were first-time U.S. representatives in 2021.

Congress is not the only place Black women consider to be important seats of power. In describing why she decided to leave her Congressional seat and run to become the first woman and Black woman elected as mayor of Los Angeles, the second largest city in the U.S. and 19th largest in the world, U.S. Representative Karen Bass said: "It was not an easy decision after serving six terms in Congress to decide not to run again, but that's an example of the extent of the crisis in Los Angeles that I would do that." Bass likened her move from national politics back to city politics as a part of the long legacy of Black women willing to do the difficult work on the ground level, working to fix persistent problems in communities. "I think that Black women are stepping up and running and leading in ways that we've always been leading, I think the difference is now we're being acknowledged" (GMA, 2022).

This work centers Black women as the current foot-soldiers for equity, justice and empowerment that has permeated public diplomacy discourse within the last five years, and at the start of the 2020s. This work firstly credits the shift in diplomatic discourse around empowerment and equity to Black women political actors, both as grassroots political actors and state political actors, who do not only see their role as merely domestic, but as part of larger global efforts around empowering marginalized peoples.

**Table 1.** Notable Historic Firsts for U.S. Black Women Elected Officials 2015–2022, Major U.S. Cities - Mayors

Name	Major U.S. City	Election cycle
Keisha Lance Bottoms	Atlanta, GA	2018
Muriel Bowser	Washington, DC	2015   2018
London Breed	San Francisco, CA	2018
Sharon Weston Broome	Baton Rouge, LA	2017   2020
LaToya Cantrell	New Orleans, LA	2018   2021
Paula Hicks Hudson	Toledo, OH	2015
Kim Janey	Boston, MA	2021 (acting)
Tishaura Jones	St. Louis, MO	2021
Lori Lightfoot	Chicago, IL	2019
Vi Alexander Lyles	Charlotte, NC	2017
Elaine O’Neal	Durham, NC	2021
Catherine Pugh	Baltimore, MD	2016
Stephanie Rawlings-Blake	Baltimore, MD	2010-2016
Ivy Taylor	San Antonio, TX	2014-2017
Angela Pickering	Raleigh, NC	2022

**Firsts Around the Globe: Black Women across the Diaspora**

In 2022, there are more Black women serving as heads of state around the globe at the same time, than at any other period in the modern era (See Table 2). Even on the African continent, since the 1970s, roughly 22 women have served as head of state, but this progression was staggered over several decades (Milano, 2022). And while Black women make up a fraction of all women elected to lead their nations, Black women have made strides as firsts in both local and national offices. Francia Márquez was a grassroots organizer and activist, who became the first Black woman

elected Vice President of Colombia in 2022. As a single mother, and housekeeper, she championed women's rights, and the working class. Elsewhere in Latin America, over 1,000 Black women mobilized to run for office following the assassination of Marielle Franco in 2018. Franco was a Black, LGBTQ woman elected to the Rio de Janeiro city council in 2016, who advocated against police brutality of Afro-Brazilians (Pereira and Aguilar, 2020).

Within the Western Hemisphere, Mia Mottley became the first woman to be elected as Prime Minister of Barbados in 2018, and was re-elected in a landslide victory in 2022. She abolished the British monarchy, removing Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, which paved the way for the country's first Black woman head of state, Sandra Mason, as President in 2021. In neighboring Trinidad and Tobago, former chief justice Paula-Mae Weekes was appointed the first woman President of the twin-island republic in 2018. And after serving as the last President of the General Council of Martinique, Josette Manin was the first woman elected as a deputy for Martinique to the French National Assembly in 2017, advocating for the interests of citizens of the French Antilles.

Grassroots activism spurred many of the Black women who ran for office from the mid-2010s. Across the pond, Joanne Anderson was elected as the first Black woman to lead a major British city: Liverpool, in 2021. Her work centered around equity and inclusion in business and Anderson has been a vocal critic of racial bias in the U.K. Germany elected its first Black woman to its parliament in 2021. Awet Tesfaiyes, who was born in Eritrea, and migrated as a child to Germany in the eighties, was elected as a member of the Green Party (Bateson, 2021). She first entered local politics when a far-right party took power in the German city of Kassel, where she introduced anti-discrimination legislation.

The far-right terrorist shooting of migrant Germans in 2020 in Hanau spurred her to run for parliament. Tesfaiesus follows another Afro-German of Mali heritage Aminata Touré who holds a number of firsts in German politics since the 2010s. In 2019, Touré became the first Afro-German vice president of any state parliament in Germany. In 2022, she became the minister of Social Affairs, Youth, Family, Senior Citizens, Integration and Equality for the state parliament of Schlesweg-Holstein in Germany.

Antonella Bundu's run for mayor of Florence was the first for a Black woman in Italy in 2019. Dutch politician Sylvana Simons ran an anti-racist, Black feminist platform in her own party she founded, making her the first Black party leader in the Dutch parliament. And 20 years after her first historic run for the French presidency in 2002, former French minister of justice Christiane Taubira made another failed bid at the French presidency in 2022, after initially winning a citizens' poll among French left-wing candidates. Taubira, who was born in French Guiana, had advocated for LGBTQ rights, reparations for slavery in the French Antilles, protection of the rights of French refugees, and policies to reduce recidivism among the formerly incarcerated. She ran for office again at the age of 70, in part decrying France's turn to far-right politics. She once wrote about her own lived experiences that shaped her politics: "I was born a woman, Black, poor, what a start in life. So many challenges to take up" (Caulcutt, 2022). In her attempt to unify French progressives in 2022 she spoke out that "the stakes are huge: people's lives, youth, the future of our country" (Caulcutt, 2022).

Sweden's first Black-hijabi member of parliament is a Black woman who migrated at the age of 2 from Somalia. Like other Black women elected to positions in Europe she notes how social issues aggravate the plight of marginalized people. "I am trying to say instead that this is a national issue.

People don't have jobs and they live in segregated areas, which puts them even further from becoming part of the society. People feel dignity when they feel part of something bigger. Criminality is due to social exclusion ... we need more equality in this country, harder laws against discrimination and racism" (Crouch, 2018). She noted that her election in 2018 and the issues she champions "has caused a lot of reactions from the racists." She said she was ready for them. Her political inspiration is none other than Shirley Chisholm, the first Black candidate for a major party to run for U.S. president (Crouch, 2018).

**Table 2.** Notable Firsts for Black Women Heads of State/ Government across the African Diaspora

Name	Country-Position	Year
Epsy Campbell	Costa Rica—Vice President	2018
Paula-Mae Weeks	Trinidad and Tobago—President	2018
Sahle-Work Zewde	Ethiopia—President	2018
Mia Amor Mottley	Barbados—Prime Minister	2018   2022
Rose Christiane Raponda	Gabon—Prime Minister	2020
Victoire Temegah Dogme	Togo—Prime Minister	2020
Kamala Harris	United States—Vice President	2021
Samia Hasan	Tanzania—President	2021
Sandra Mason	Barbados—President	2021
Francía Márquez	Colombia—Vice President	2022

## Black Women and the Advancing of A Global Equity Framework

Before exploring case studies of how the Black women elected officials mentioned above executed public diplomacy within the last decade, their efforts must be contextualized

first in an exploration of Black feminist ideals and values. This helps to explain what moral philosophies guide their actions in public spaces, community building, and the advancement of civil rights and human dignity. Black women's voices are often left out in mainstream theorizing about political thought, and global ideals. They rarely appear or are cited in works on diplomacy or international relations, save for when serving as actors of policies enacted by men, as in historical studies on Patricia Roberts Harris (President Lyndon Johnson), or more contemporary ones on Condoleezza Rice (President George W. Bush) or Susan Rice (Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama) for instance.

Black women's roles in shaping public diplomacy are often studied as extensions of the often white, powerful men whose policies they advanced and less through an exploration of how Black women organize and engage communities. Therefore, in reviewing the ideals Black women in public and political life have championed, the works of Black women scholars will be exclusively discussed as canon, when in most scholarly analyses, they are often relegated as an afterthought, if not cited at all. This centers Black feminist scholarship and thought within larger studies of public diplomacy, putting it in conversation with traditional views of the field. Firstly, in this section, I summarize Black women's philosophies. Secondly, I distinguish how historically, Black women diplomatic actors embodied these ideals, but were constrained by their appointments as political actors rather than elected actors with levels of authority to champion ideals they firmly believed in.

### **Black Women's Intellectual Thought**

Public diplomacy frameworks often privilege state-sponsored actions in engaging foreign publics (LaPorte, 2012). However, for groups traditionally marginalized from

political power, how interactions with foreign publics occur must be understood in the historical context in how marginalized groups organize within communities. In *A Shining Thread of Hope* Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson (1998) revisit how political and civic life for Black women in America after the abolition of slavery were rooted in community upliftment and advancement. Their civic work towards equity and justice in America, predated the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The thousands of organizations black women formed to promote the welfare of their community were a very different proposition...In the late nineteenth century, the black community was faced with poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination on a massive scale. When black women found that white governmental agencies and other organizations had no intention of providing services to the communities in which they lived and worked, they stepped into the void. It was a monumental task" (Clark Hine and Thompson, 1998, p. 177).

Black women's intellectual writings on the struggles of Black women in public and political life is often a struggle against patriarchal systems embedded in modern societies. Cuban-Jamaican scholar Sylvia Winter has written about the original structure of human existence as a divine, male-centric hierarchy. She writes that "a feminism in its own name directs its revolt not against the agents of the code, male or capitalist supremacists, but against the code itself" (1982, p. 16). Winter adds that for feminism to subvert the code, it requires women to refuse "its own prescribed role in the empirical articulation... moving out of our assigned categories" (1982, p. 16).

As such Trinidadian-American Black feminist scholar Carole Boyce Davies wrote that "Black feminist politics can only become transformational if it is sharper in its opposition and critique of systems of domination and able to activate its principles in more practical ways" (1999, p. 27). Davies notes that the work of Black women in public life is both deliberate and practical and "located at sites of resistance to, and struggle against, multiple oppressions: whiteness, maleness, bourgeois culture, heterosexuality, Anglo-centeredness and so on." What Black women in critical movements fight to achieve is to challenge "social conditions and processes and give value to existences often rendered silent or invisible in current patterns of social ordering" (p. 27).

It is because society has rendered Black women, by both their designation and gender as invisible, as bell hooks (1981) has outlined in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. In *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, Some of Us Are Brave*, African American women intellectuals Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith (1982), wrote that to define a subfield of critical studies as "'Black women's studies' is an act charged with political significance." Hull and Smith wrote that in naming this discipline it meant "taking the stance that Black women exist ... and to use the term ... in a white-male world is an act of political courage" (p. xvii). In this way, examining that Black women exist and are shifting the paradigms of the nature, structure and discourse of public diplomacy today is also a political exercise, because in a field that is also white-male dominated, such an exploration aims to bolster that public diplomacy can take on radical forms when pursued by those who typically do not look like, represent or speak for those who traditionally are vessels of public diplomacy in our modern world.

South African scholar Cheryl Hendricks (2011) and Kenyan scholar Awino Okech (2016) have articulated that post-colonial African conflicts should employ a Black feminist approach to peace and equity policy frameworks on the African continent. Okech notes that it is the work of African women's movements that resulted in the creation of "policy instruments on gender and women's rights on the one hand, and peace and security on the other hand" (2016, p. 9). It shifted the narrative of perceiving women as only victims of conflicts, but separate from being leaders in the rebuilding of societies and post-conflict resolution. These narratives assume traditional gender norms that men must lead in restoring post-conflict societies. Many of the pre-conflict issues were gendered-inequalities, and resolving those issues post-conflict, require women at the table and elevating women's issues and rights in promoting stable societies. As such, the work of African women's movements on the continent are integral to the promotion of peace and conflict resolution across the African Union.

What is clear is there is a Black feminist approach and tradition across the Black Diaspora that is permeating through diplomatic language, policy frameworks and discourse. It is rooted in Black women's grassroots movements that bubble up through the halls of power at critical moments in societies. What the past decade has offered is a critical mass of Black women rising to seats of power, where Black feminist ideals are not only ideals enshrined in frameworks, but now tools that Black women elected officials can enact as local and national leaders.

## **The Trailblazers: Pioneering in Public Diplomacy; In Their Own Words**

Black women's organizing at the community level often is a precursor to their ascent in political life. It allows scholars to understand the global engagement they then pursue. Before New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell ran for city council, she was president of the Broadmoor Improvement Association, where she led her neighbors to fight to revive their community that was as a possible neighborhood marked by the legislature to be destroyed post-Hurricane Katrina. Cantrell's community-based work, prior to running for office, echoes her sister further South. Colombia's vice president Francia Márquez fought against illegal gold mining in her town, earning her the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2018. Both women had intimately lived-experiences with environmental vulnerability and the exploitation and inequities it brings to marginalized communities. Their grassroots work on environmental sustainability informs their politics at the state and global level.

Patricia Roberts Harris may have been the first Black woman appointed as an ambassador by a U.S. President, when Lyndon Johnson made her his administration's envoy to Luxembourg in 1965 and later as a delegate to the United Nations. She passed on to her law students at Howard University, an Historically Black University in Washington, D.C. where she also attended as an undergraduate, what informed her public diplomacy (Pruitt, 2021). Prior to engaging foreign publics, Roberts Harris engaged the plights of marginalized peoples at home, having grown up in a segregated America. She was an organizer of women's rights and humans rights organizations, and used her legal training to defend civil liberties during the Civil Rights era. In the Howard Law Journal, her former student wrote that she wrestled as a diplomat with the "American Contradiction"

that the U.S. Constitution sacrificed “the rights of some” in order to “secure the rights of others ... as its fundamental principle, in the equality for all” (Baker, 1986, Bell 1987.)

In her work, the “Rightful Limits of Freedom” (1971), Harris wrote that societies ultimately pay a price for social exclusion, and that the majority cannot ignore the plights of the marginalized. She wrote that “the legitimate concerns of the politically powerless minority might, at best, resort to civil disobedience, and, at worst, resort to violence” (Baker, p. 424). In 1969, Roberts Harris reflected on taking up her ambassadorship in Luxembourg, and was asked why she did not pursue an appointment in Africa or Asia, given her background in civil rights. She stated that it was an opportunity then to be given a seat at the table where few people of color are afforded a voice. Robert-Harris shared: “I would not have taken Asia. I would not have taken Africa because there would not have been the learning potential there. There’d never been a Negro in the heart of Europe, and I was interested, partly from that point of view, but more professionally from the point of view of being part of the total European traffic” (Goodell, 1969, p. 33).

Later as part of her duties to sell the war in Vietnam to European publics, Roberts Harris conceded her odds with articulating U.S. policy. She recalled that the war in Vietnam “was unpopular in Luxembourg. The young people had no appreciation for it. At the beginning I did deal with it in open meetings and question-and-answer sessions with the youth. But after the resumption of bombing in 1966, I ceased to have question-and-answer sessions on this because it was too difficult to define and justify” (Goodell, 1969, p. 40).

The first Black woman ambassador appointed to Africa, Mabel M. Smythe (Haith), and the second Black woman envoy after Roberts Harris was also an alumna of a Historically

Black University: Spelman College (Pruitt and Dawuni, 2021, p. 78). Smythe recalled her approach to public diplomacy on the continent in an interview conducted by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training's "Foreign Affairs Oral History Project: Women Ambassador Series in 1986." In a conversation with Ann Miller Morin, Smythe said she "saw the most important part of my job building good relations, increasing our ability to understand the Cameroonians, fostering their ability to understand and appreciate our point of view. The business of making friends was more important than pushing specific policies. The policies followed the friendship, rather than the other way around" (p. 93). Although economics was her area of expertise, Smythe noted that in working with developing countries "the cultural affairs and exchanges are so often a way of achieving the economic understanding" (p. 94). She added that "the whole question of being able to talk with each other depends on this cultural interaction and understanding. Until we have that, we sometimes can't communicate on things which are terribly basic" (p. 94).

As trailblazers in Black women public diplomacy, and as diplomats, both Roberts Harris and Smythe, recounted that they wrestled with navigating public diplomacy as ambassadors be it in Europe or in the developing world. As Roberts Harris described it: "One is always a spokesman for somebody. And when one is spokesman for the United States government, the perimeters of the spokesmanship are rather clearly defined" (Goodell, p. 34). Even with these "perimeters" in place, as Black women diplomats in these roles, they worked to make meaningful connections to publics and communities that presented an alternative view of America to global publics. As Black women, they represented the "American Contradiction" to foreign publics, yet they hoped to improve the lives of youth in Europe, or women and children in Cameroon, by their very ability

to relate to what communities needed most and how to leverage their power as Black women diplomats in tangible ways that communities could see. Building people-relations came first—policy after. It made the kind of public diplomacy they offered authentic and lasting.

These early Black women pioneers of public diplomacy paved the way for Black women elected officials today as they engage foreign publics in ways that their forebears were unable to do, by the novelty of their existence in diplomatic spaces that were often reserved for white envoys, and the constraints of the times they operated in, particularly during times of war. Today, Black women elected officials can put people and policy together and first, in ways Black women diplomats before them could not have done. The key shift here is their election to office have provided them with political power to advance diplomacy frameworks on behalf of the constituents who brought them to power. They can appoint cabinet roles, and direct resources to engage in public diplomacy that the earlier pioneers could not. And at a time where local politics is often at odds with national policy, city public diplomacy can vary starkly in tone and nature from national frameworks.

Likewise, when Black women do earn the top job as head of state, they are able to set national diplomacy. However, for small states or developing nations, engaging global publics comes with building solidarity among often larger or emerging states that share similar challenges and opportunities. It provides alternative ways of building new alliances that are not often rooted in post-colonial ties, and Western dependencies. They aim to foster mutual advancement of states without the past exploitation that defined diplomatic ties between the West and the developing world.

Given the ways in which mid-twentieth century Black women pioneers in public diplomacy navigated representing ideals and policies that often conflicted them, Black women elected officials of the twenty-first century are now in positions of power that allow them to act on behalf of localities, municipalities, regionalities and states where they are able to directly articulate diplomatic frameworks and engage foreign citizens around ideals they have championed in their own civic and now political life. Next, I explore Black women elected officials' public diplomacy activities since 2015, beginning at the city level and expanding out to case studies at the state and national level.

## **Black Women Elected Officials and Public Diplomacy Today**

### **Cultural Economy And the Ties that Bind: Black Women Public Diplomacy at the City Level**

It was the first sister-city agreement between San Antonio and an African city, but in 2015, Mayor Ivy Taylor signed a Friendship Agreement with Namibia's capital city Windhoek and later that year, the first Namibian president to visit the state of Texas did so at the invitation of San Antonio's first Black woman mayor, who is also the first Black woman in the U.S. to lead a city with a population over 1 million residents. San Antonio had prior sister agreements with Mexican, European and Asian cities, but never with an African city.

In announcing her own visit to Namibia, Taylor stated in her official release "As an American of African descent, I am especially excited for this trip" (Bradshaw, 2016). Taylor is presently the university president of a historically Black university—Rust College, and is a Black scholar and urban planner. As mayor she spoke of the need for educational and investment exchanges for major Black urban centers.

During her visit to the Namibia University of Science and Technology, Taylor lectured to students on “Sustainable Housing: Community Design and Development” and the need for shared ideas around renewable energy and access to clean water systems. Taylor stated in her official release that “in order to be a globally competitive city, we must know the ties between our region and cities around the world” (Bradshaw, 2016).

**Figure 1.** Official Welcome Post to San Antonio Mayor Ivy Taylor on the Namibian Presidency Facebook Account, October 24, 2016.



Across state lines in another red state in Louisiana, Benin native and New Orleans resident Rosine Pema Sanga, the city director for international relations, and New Orleans native Lisa Alexis were tasked by New Orleans' first Black woman mayor Latoya Cantrell to define who and what this city is to the world after her historic election in 2018. Although interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Cantrell's Office of Cultural Economy aimed to globalize the city under the banner of investing and preserving cultural capital. Cantrell embarked on building global relationships to "preserve, invest in, and promote this cultural treasure and the men, women and children who create it. That is what I have charged our Office of Cultural Economy with doing" (City of New Orleans, 2019).

In post-Katrina New Orleans, cultural industries, as the mayor pointed, were central to promoting equity in a city that has experienced an unequal return after the costliest natural disaster in modern history in the U.S. (Muhlbaum and Korsh, 2021). Since Cantrell took office in 2019, up to her cancelled trip to the World Cities Summit in Singapore in July 2022, her office of Cultural Economy aimed to tie the unique economic activity of African Americans in this iconic city to the impacts of climate change and environmental vulnerability. Her first sister-city agreements in 2019 in Cap-Haitien, Haiti and Cape Coast, Ghana aimed at re-connecting the African roots of New Orleans' culture across the trans-Atlantic slave route from Cape Coast, to St. Domingue and up to New Orleans. In signing her agreement with Cap-Haitien, Cantrell tweeted "New Orleans is Haiti's first Diaspora" (Cantrell, 2019). Cantrell then reconnected the ways in which New Orleans culture then transformed parts of the city's former colonizer, by signing a sister-city agreement in 2022 with Antibes, France, where New Orleans' resident Sydney Bechet carried jazz with him setting the stage for

one of the cities' largest festivals that feature New Orleans culture (City of New Orleans, 2022).

The "charge of Cultural Economy" is what Lisa Alexis stated, was to activate "the potential within our Culture Bearers to live and support their lives through the passion they so love" (City of New Orleans, 2019). In promoting New Orleans' culture through sister-city agreements, Cantrell and her team within her Office of Cultural Economy were also connecting this cultural commodity as a scarcity vulnerable to environmental change that devastates communities and the cultural capital within them. Environmental vulnerability threatened to eradicate the way of life for African American cultural industries in New Orleans and the mayor's office put climate change and cultural capital at the forefront of public diplomacy. As she described it: the city's Creole chefs, Mardi Gras Indians and "world-class musicians" were the cultural ambassadors she wished to deploy as part of her city diplomacy, and embedded in sharing the city's culture is building solidarity around the effects of environmental vulnerability, demonstrating how communities of color and their livelihoods, are impacted most by climate change.

Cantrell's office of Intergovernmental Relations, and Community & Economic Development joined the office of Cultural Economy to plan the Mayor's official trip to Ghana as a speaker at the Essence Global Black Economic Forum in December 2019, to coincide with Ghana's "Year of the Return." As part of the trip, Mayor Cantrell signed a memorandum of agreement with Cape Coast, Ghana's Mayor Ernest Arthur for a sister-city agreement. In addition to meeting with Ghana's President and First Lady and the Mayor of Accra, Cantrell also dedicated a day of community service in Kumasi to meet locals and students.

**Figure 2.** New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell in Kumasi, Ghana, 2019. Photo courtesy city of New Orleans.



Cantrell reflected on her time spent with ordinary Ghanaians:

Although we share poverty in our communities ... one thing that we do not share is this notion of a culture of violence... I would really love to build up that exchange here with our young people to get them to understand that there is no reason for us to own what has been talked about as a culture of violence" (Wilson, 2020).

In addition to learning from Ghanaians about youth empowerment and education access, Cantrell kept climate

change, water quality and waste management in her exchanges with Ghanaian representatives central to her conversations around city solutions. The city of New Orleans is challenged with water quality, waste management and of course battling the yearly effects of climate change through a more dangerous hurricane season annually.

It was not Cantrell's first trip to Ghana. She first visited the country in 2012 as a city council member. She however said that this time as mayor it was different because as a council member "some things she can only encourage," but as mayor "some things she can insist happen." As the chief elected official of a major U.S. city, she had the authority to allocate resources and create policies that allowed for economic and cultural exchange among two places that shared similar challenges and that could provide each other with solutions to persistent social issues. Cantrell described sister-city agreements that should be "more than a piece of paper," and that New Orleans was well-positioned and should connect and think globally (Sutton, 2020).

The pandemic may have paused many of the follow through actions on delegation visits and exchanges between Black women elected officials and the continent after 2019, but it did not disrupt the forging of mutual relations between U.S. cities that are primarily, urban, Black and in many cases neglected in conservative states in the South. Before deciding not to seek reelection in 2021, Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms delivered the virtual keynote address during the pandemic for the African Women's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum in December 2020. The annual Cape Town, South Africa conference draws over 15,000 business leaders, community leaders and officials as a key Pan-African meeting.

**Figure 3.** Virtual Public Diplomacy. Flyer of Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms as keynote speaker for the 2020 Africa Women Forum



Lance Bottoms was invited as the mayor of one of the U.S.'s top five cities for Black-owned businesses. In her remarks, Lance Bottoms spoke not only of the Black innovation and entrepreneurship in Atlanta, but the history of Atlanta in the Civil Rights Movement and its role in fighting for equity and justice around the world.

In speaking virtually to attendees of the 2020 AWIEF, Lance Bottoms shared how she was moving the work of

Ambassador Andrew Young forward when he forged ties with African nations as mayor of Atlanta and worked to center American policy towards African nations as Ambassador to the United Nations.

Lance Bottoms noted that through sister-city agreements with Lagos, Nigeria and Cotonou, Benin, Atlanta continues to develop “many productive cultural, humanitarian, educational and economical exchanges” (City of Atlanta Office of International Affairs, 2020). As the second African American woman to serve as mayor of Atlanta, Lance Bottoms spoke of her leadership on women’s issues. In her remarks she shared how her city is partnering with AWEIF to model the city’s investment in women start-ups through publicly funded incubators, and providing spaces and resources for women to work.

We are also excited to know that AWEIF and WEI are connecting to explore ways that strengthen the relationship between Atlanta and the African continent. Potential partnerships include assessing and accessing new markets, developing import-export opportunities, diversifying supply chain capabilities and providing insight around best practices for women entrepreneurs.

Programs like WEI and AWEIF serve to level the playing field while bringing more women leaders to the table and helping to foster diverse business community. In Atlanta we understand the needs and the pressures that our marginalized communities face, that’s why we continue to make equity the center of all that we do” (City of Atlanta Office of International Affairs, 2020).

President Joe Biden appointed Lance Bottoms to lead the White House Office of Public Engagement, and as his senior advisor. Like other Black women mayors, Lance Bottoms openly criticized President Donald Trump's policies on immigrants and refugees, prohibiting the Atlanta city jail from holding ICE detainees in 2018. Like Lance Bottoms, Mayor Muriel Bowser in Washington, D.C. challenged President Donald Trump's handling of black racial justice protests in her city. Black women mayors in the U.S. were both subject to pressures from both state and federal governments on their policies that centered equity and human rights over politics.

They offered global discourse and actions that contrasted official U.S. diplomacy during the Trump era. When President Trump referred to African nations, Haiti and Central American nations as "shithole" countries, Black women mayors forged friendship agreements with those countries, visited their leaders and citizens, and welcomed their migrants into their cities with sanctuary. They offered leadership on women's empowerment through business and educational ties with African nations at a time when the White House regularly offered misogynistic discourse on women and sought to strip legal precedence on women's rights. While President Trump's diplomatic actions emboldened Russia, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot suspended a sister-city agreement with Moscow and Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles severed sister-city ties with the Russian city of Voronezh.

They defied Washington's diplomatic discourse, leading an alternative public diplomacy, engaging marginalized communities, and re-engaging the African Diaspora at a time when Washington's discourse and diplomatic actions to Black nation-states was offensive at the least, and hostile at the worse. Their engagement with the world, even at the city level, provided an alternative form of public diplomacy,

building solidarity with global publics that showcased that American ideals were as diverse as Americans themselves.

Black women mayors during the Trump era led boldly on fostering initiatives that strengthened and supported women as the backbones of communities and cities, sharing mutually in ways in which their resources can be exchanged and harnessed for the good of both spaces. When the Trump administration signaled a closing off to migrants, particularly Black and brown refugees, Black women mayors welcomed them in. D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser released a statement defying Trump's anti-immigrant policies and touting the specific ways her mayor's office would support immigrant families, both documented and undocumented in the nation's capital. Bowser's office stated both in English and Spanish that:

The President should understand that not only are these threats cruel and antithetical to our American values, they are actually making our communities less safe by sending more residents into hiding, cut off from resources, support, and opportunity. Washington, DC remains a proud sanctuary city, and we are committed to protecting the rights of all our immigrant families in the face of these disturbing threats. We will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our immigrant neighbors this week and every week, while continuing our calls for Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform that protects Dreamers and Temporary Protected Status holders and creates pathways to citizenship" (Executive Office of the Mayor, 2019).

When the Trump administration insulted Black and brown peoples around the world, Black women mayors through their city leadership renewed and forged new ties, even when their state legislatures often followed Washington's policy. Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh wrote in a statement:

Like all Americans who embrace decency and the values of diversity and inclusion, and who celebrate what made America great in the first place, I'm appalled by these latest comments of President Donald Trump regarding Haitians and people of African nations. They reinforce abhorrent racist attitudes and evidence of the lack of knowledge, understanding, and empathy we expect of the person who occupies the highest office of the land" (Richman, 2018).

Puerto Rico's former mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz who had criticized the President's neglect of Puerto Ricans after Hurricane Maria stood in solidarity with Black and brown people in the face of U.S. rhetoric that disparaged citizens across the African Diaspora. Cruz posted to her Twitter account: "No Trump we are not lazy or ingrates. While you golf, we make sure we survive despite efforts to put us down we will rise ... We are all Haitians; we are Africans; we are Puerto Ricans ... we are all humans" (Cruz, 2018).

Together they demonstrated that big cities can run public diplomacy frameworks successfully that contrasted with state and federal discourse. Even in deep blue states, like California, Black women mayors sought to rectify historical justices that put them at odds with major world leaders. San Francisco's first Black woman mayor London Breed defended the installation of the San Francisco "Comfort Woman" Memorial after the Mayor of Osaka Hirofumi Yoshimura issued Breed a 10-page letter about the monument, and

before his assassination, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that the monument is in opposition of the “views of the Japanese government” (Ingber, 2018). Breed did not cave to the Japanese government’s requests, but countered that it was possible to still maintain San Francisco’s sister-city relationship with Osaka that dates back to the 1950s, while still calling out historical wrongs. Breed responded to Osaka’s mayor’s document with an official statement of her own in response to Japan’s official opposition to the monument:

One Mayor cannot unilaterally end a relationship that exists between the people of our two cities, especially one that has existed for over sixty years. In our eyes, the Sister City relationship between San Francisco and Osaka continues today through the connection of our people, and San Francisco looks forward to strengthening the bonds that tie our two great cities together.

The San Francisco Comfort Woman Memorial is a symbol of the struggle faced by all women who have been, and are currently, forced to endure the horrors of enslavement and sex trafficking. These victims deserve our respect and this memorial reminds us all of events and lessons we must never forget” (Office of the Mayor, 2018).

**Figure 4.** Osaka, Japan severed sister-city relations with San Francisco after Mayor London Breed supported the installation of the “Comfort Woman” memorial, to commemorate the horrors women and girls faced during World War II.



In pursuing contemporary forms of public diplomacy, Black women elected officials in the United States do not shy away from speaking boldly about injustices and inequities even as they advance the business of globalizing their cities and municipalities, both with Western nations and creating new ties with developing countries, particularly on the African continent and across the African Diaspora. In the past, Black women diplomats equivocated between their own philosophies about injustices, in an effort to execute their jobs on behalf of the state. As America’s first Black woman diplomat put it: “One is always a spokesman

for somebody. And when one is spokesman for the United States government, the perimeters of the spokespersonship are rather clearly defined" (Goodell, 1969, p. 34).

Now, Black women elected officials are redefining what it means to speak to foreign publics, and to speak for themselves, representative of the marginalization they can empathize with as African Americans and as women. How Black women elected officials in the U.S. have sought to forge a dual understanding of who and what is America to global publics adds value to the execution of public diplomacy by political actors in the U.S. today. It is a timely and much needed aspect of showcasing America's diversity, and diversity of thought, in both traditional and public diplomatic spaces, and it is an important tool in maintaining global goodwill at a time when sentiments about American values declined within the last decade (Pew Research Center, 2020).

### **Speaking Truths and Taking Action: Black feminist Public Diplomacy at a Global Level**

It went viral. Her speech filled headlines around the globe. A Black woman head of state told the most powerful leaders of the world to "try harder" (News18, 2021). She called the failures of Western industrial nations to act now and in the past on climate change as a "death sentence" to small island nation states that was not only "unjust" but "immoral." She asked "What must we say to our people, living on the frontline in the Caribbean, in Africa, in Latin America, in the Pacific." She told how from the Maldives, to Barbados, Kenya and Samoa, "Our people are watching, and our people are taking note." She asked: "when will leaders lead?" (United Nations Environment Programme, 2021). She is not waiting for the West to do so either about climate justice. The

United Nations named her the 2021 Champion of the Earth for Policy Leadership.

Barbados' Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley quotes Bob Marley in global summits, made both former U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prince Charles of Wales uncomfortable, and set off a ripple effect across the British Commonwealth that their symbolic heads of state no longer need to be to the British crown and that former colonized states will boldly continue to insist on reparations from their European colonizers.

After the devastation of the Eastern Caribbean nations by 2019's Hurricane Dorian, Mottley has rallied her nation's citizens to plant over \$1 million trees, restore the island's reefs, and grow sustainable crops to aid the nation's susceptibility to climate change. She has educated global audiences on how the cost of rebuilding from Dorian, and the decline of tourism as a result of the global pandemic has saddled her nation with large debts from the International Monetary Fund. She works to educate world leaders and citizens on how climate change keeps developing nations in debt and impoverished. In calling out a "Code Red" to the G7 and G20 countries, Mottley stated in her viral COP21 speech that:

For those who have eyes to see, for those who have ears to listen, and for those who have a heart to feel: 1.5 °C is what we need to survive, 2 °C, yes, S[ecretary] G[eneral], is a death sentence for the people of Antigua and Barbuda, for the people of the Maldives, for the people of Dominica and Fiji, for the people of Kenya and Mozambique, and yes, for the people of Samoa and Barbados. We do not want that dreaded death sentence. And we have come here to say: "Try harder." Try harder because our people, the climate army, the world, the planet,

need our actions now—not next year, not in the next decade” (Black Agenda Review, 2021).

**Figure 5.** U.S. President Joe Biden and Barbados President Mia Mottley at COP 26 in 2021.



Mottley is not waiting for the G7 or G20 or the U.S. for that matter to lead action on climate change. She is looking to forge as many South-South alliances around the issue as possible. Through the Alliance of Small Island states, Mottley has pressed the alliance since it met in Barbados 25 years ago to put aside differences and to work together for the sake of the citizens of those island states. Citing little collective progress and the urgency of environmental hazards facing small island nations, Mottley stated:

We have a global community that is split, and split at a time when we do not have the luxury of time... that really what is at stake for the oceans and for our environment is far worse than anything we have contemplated.

We are not just here as representatives of our country, but we are here in trust for humanity" (BLP, 2019).

She has rallied other regional nations around her, bringing Latin America and the Caribbean together as the first region to adopt the U.N. Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. She advocates on financing in support of island nation states to ready their nations to implement stronger forms of resilience against natural hazards from hurricanes to droughts. And she is looking towards the African Union to leverage Global South-South alliances that press Western industrialized states on the impact of inaction on rising temperatures, warming oceans and the vulnerability of nations like her own.

Mottley may have been elected with a landslide twice by a population that comprises slightly over a quarter of a million people, but she has amplified the tiny nation's voices by multiplying the peoples she speaks for, by mobilizing their governments, environmental actors, and citizens around small island nation state solidarity. She has deployed cultural diplomacy in her efforts as well. She designated a daughter of Barbados, who is now the U.S.' youngest self-made billionaire, and Grammy-award winning recording artist Rihanna, as an ambassador and national hero for Barbados to promote and champion the sustainability of her native island and to direct investment to the country. Rihanna stated that she has championed Mottley's causes through her philanthropy as a cultural ambassador for the nation. The singer described Mottley as a "role model" because of her

"willingness to go against the grain, to against what's safe. She's very brave, she's very daring, and that comes with what she's passionate about. That is a woman that I can respect, always" (Loop, 2019).

Mottley's approach to diplomacy mixes both traditional and public diplomacy in advocating for her nation and the Caribbean region. She hosted the first ever AfriCaribbean Trade and Investment Forum in September 2022 bringing both governmental and private sector stakeholders across the Atlantic together to begin ways to solve persistent socio-economic problems within the Diaspora through AfriCaribbean South-South partnerships. Under the theme: "One People, One Destiny: Uniting and Reimagining Our Future," Mottley worked to bring CARICOM together with the African Union with real outcomes around sustainable development within the African Diaspora. The forum resulted in agreements among several Caribbean nation states and the African Union; the inclusion of the Caribbean to access to investment and capital from the African Export-Import bank. Not only did the 2022 AfriCaribbean forum begin to relink investment across the Black Atlantic, it sought to put issues of climate resilience, poverty eradication and cultural economy in conversation with macro-economic initiatives. Mottley called for a new era of global Black solidarity between the African continent and her descendants in the Caribbean.

We, children of independence, have determined that we shall not allow another generation to pass without bringing together that which should have been torn asunder. We face common battles from the climate crisis to the COVID pandemic, now to the third aspect of it, with respect to inflation and debt that threaten to tear too many of our countries apart and threaten to put back

into poverty too many of our people...It is not anticipated that we can reverse centuries in a few years, but it is anticipated that there are some who must claim the courage to jump off the ship and make it happen" (Afreximbank, 2022).

**Figure 6.** Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley heralds a new era of Caribbean and African solidarity around mutual investment, climate resiliency, and cultural solidarity.



Building solidarity among people of African descent is also taking place within one continent as the new Colombian government seeks to embark on its new progressive politics in South America and across the Western Hemisphere. At the heart of this strategy is Colombia's first Black woman vice president Francia Márquez, who has been an advocate for women, the poor, and the marginalized long before her activism put her at the center of Colombia's political shifts.

Since being elected, she has travelled to other South American nations with large numbers of Colombian migrants. She has visited Bolivia, Curaçao, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina and with each post-election tour, mixed traditional diplomacy with public diplomacy. When Márquez speaks, she speaks on behalf of not only Afro-Colombians, but Afro-Latinos and people of African descent. She has called for reparations across the continent for both the Indigenous and Black South Americans. She punctures her speech with “somos” or “we” identifying herself with Black and marginalized communities she is a part of. During her visit to Brazil in July 2022, Márquez avoided meeting with members of Brazil’s conservative presidency under Jair Bolsonaro, and instead paid a visit to the Marielle Franco Institute. Márquez has publicly echoed the slogan of the first Black woman council member for Rio de Janeiro “eu sou porque nós somos” (I am because we are), which is derived from Ubuntu philosophy of the collective work of community and echoes the Black feminist philosophy of twentieth century African American women activists: “lifting as we climb.” Marielle Franco’s assassination in 2018 ricocheted across the Diaspora, as her work as a Black feminist elected official touched Black women-led movements across the African Diaspora.

When Márquez as vice president of Colombia arrived in Brazil in 2022, where national politics were at odds with those of her own party and those of her supporters, her decision to visit and pay tribute to Franco, instead of Bolsonaro’s administration was intentional and symbolic of who she represents and aims to empower across the continent during her historic vice presidency. The Colombian vice president stated she respected that Bolsonaro was the duly elected president, and that the Colombian government will work their Brazilian counterparts, but she also emphasized that she would continue to embolden Brazilian activists and Afro-Brazilians to fight for justice and equity.

Márquez aimed to speak directly to Afro-Brazilian's reminding them of the activism Franco began to empower the favelas, and to consider their next election as deciding on a president who could advance the well-being of Afro-Brazilians. One of Brazil's leading newspapers, *Folha de S. Paulo* published Márquez' remarks urging Brazilians to select a president who had a track record of creating policies that impact a country where 50 percent of citizens are Black. In her interview with *Folha*, Márquez made it clear that her mission as part of the Petro government was to foster a Latin America that was in pursuit of human rights and dignity. She stated that her visit was one to speak directly to Brazilian citizens. And that her mission as the highest-ranking Black woman elected official in South America is to combat the effects of racism across Latin America.

Eu vim ao Brasil para me reunir com líderes políticos e sociais, tanto do movimento negro quanto de esquerda. Acabo de falar com o candidato à Presidência do Brasil que espero que ganhe as eleições, Lula da Silva.

E digo isso porque acredito que Lula é o único presidente que levou em consideração os direitos da população negra no Brasil. Um país em que mais de 50% das pessoas são negras tem que pensar em políticas de governo a favor dessa população.

É como uma diáspora africana, uma diáspora de descendência africana. Temos um enraizamento negro profundo. Brasil e a Colômbia são os dois países da América Latina com a maior população afrodescendente da região.

São cerca de 200 milhões de afrodescendentes ou negros, o que exige uma política internacional para lutas contra o racismo" (Bergamo/*Folha de S. Paulo*, 2022).

**Figure 7.** Colombian Vice President Francia Márquez speaks to Afro-Brazilian activists during her visit to Rio de Janeiro in July 2022 and pays homage to assassinated Afro-Brazilian councilmember Marielle Franco.



Within only one month in office Vice President Márquez has placed the frameworks of social movements at the forefront of Colombian traditional and public diplomacy. She has leveraged her activist background in identifying with the pueblos, barrios, campos and favelas of cities across Latin America during official visits to those countries. In her travels across the region she speaks of “we” and “our movements” and she speaks directly to Afro and Indigenous Latin Americans about centering their movements in the current work of the region. She has put gender inequality, climate change, income inequality, education and access to public services to re-usher in a new era of progressive policies and politics across Latin America. And as part of her role in the Petro administration, her ideals are not only domestic, but

regional and an integral part of the Petro-administration's foreign policy strategy of rallying Latin American nations around more progressive ideals.

Márquez' rise to the number two spot in Colombia's government also recalibrated U.S. diplomacy with the nation. The Biden administration sent Desirée Cormier Smith, as special representative for Racial Equity and Justice for the State Department to join the U.S. delegation at the Colombian government's inauguration on August 7, 2022 (The White House, 2022). Cormier Smith shared during her visit to Colombia that her most productive meetings were with the new vice president who she met with on her first official day in office. Cormier Smith described the election of Márquez also inspirational not only for Colombians but across the Hemisphere and that it provided an opportunity for the United States to reengage with Colombia in new ways that can improve the well-being of Afro and Indigenous citizens (Gómez Gil, 2022).

It was a true honor for me to be able to witness history in Colombia, as a Black American woman to be able to witness the inauguration of Colombia's first Afro-Colombian vice president was something very special and deeply personal for me. So I congratulate all the people of Colombia for this historic moment. It was a historic moment that harkens back for me to ... 2021, when my country inaugurated our first Black vice president Kamala Harris" (Gómez Gil, 2022)

The historic election of two Black women as vice presidents in the region has shifted U.S. foreign policy in the way it engages old allies and forms new partnerships. It is also integral to the Biden administration's reframing of the image of the U.S. after the Trump presidency. Biden's

State Department, through appointments like Cormier Smith, aim to center the work of human rights in reengaging with global citizens at a time when social movements have reached a critical mass in both the developed and developing world. Cormier Smith pointed this out in her interview with Colombian radio, indicating that her role as a U.S. diplomat with a unique focus on racial equity and justice is not central to U.S. foreign strategy because it is how they must engage communities today both in the promotion of peace and stability around the world.

The situation of human rights in Colombia is one that we have to put in a global perspective .... We were speaking of the situation of human rights defenders, the dangers that they face globally as a serious problem. No one should be in fear, no one's safety should be in peril simply for standing up for the human rights of people, whether they be women, whether they be indigenous people, people of African descent, the LGBTQI+ person, and persons with disabilities, the basic premise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that every single human being is born free and equal, with dignity and rights and we must stand up to that and that is exactly why I occupy, that Secretary [Antony] Blinken created the position that I am honored to occupy now" (Gómez Gil, 2022).

Given the precedence set by Black women elected officials at the local and regional level, the U.S. State Department's inclusion of Black women diplomats and special envoys in the Biden administration works to create a parallel approach on a national level that emphasizes meaningful change at the global community level. Cormier Smith shared on Colombian radio that the U.S. will now work in areas of solidarity. In speaking on climate change,

she noted that the U.S. will work with Colombian Black and Indigenous communities to improve their climate resilience. More importantly, she described that it is also a new approach to public diplomacy, and that in addition to supporting “these communities in building their resiliency” that the U.S. “can learn from them and their practices as we try to combat the impact of climate change” (Gómez Gil, 2022). In electing and positioning Black women in spaces of power, grassroots interventions and solutions to pressing social and global challenges are being elevated in conversations in halls of global power, when in the past, those voices were marginalized and silenced.

### **The Road Ahead: ‘Lifting As they Climb’**

The work of advancing equity by Black women elected officials is still a hard-fought journey and one not without criticism and resistance. They often times receive biased coverage in the media, their leadership styles are demeaned, and they face constant racist and gendered attacks, as well as threats against their own safety. Mayor Latoya Cantrell was criticized so intensely for her global travels that she cancelled an important trip to Singapore in July 2022, that aimed to address climate change facing major cities, an issue integral to advocating for resources needed in New Orleans. The Republican state legislature threatened to cut off post-Katrina infrastructure funding to the city after she refused to prosecute abortion seekers or providers. Vice President Kamala Harris was described as tone deaf in the media during her visit to Central American countries in 2021. However, it has not stopped her work on the ground. She is spearheading “private and social enterprise” initiatives in Central America to address the root causes of migration (The White House, 2021).

They are also grossly underrepresented and carry the aspirations and hopes of people of African descent around the world, and communities of color. However, as more Black women and women of color aspire to elected positions of power, they hold the potential to expand the collective work of Black women elected officials who are advancing and advocating city-led and state-led actions that brings citizens together across borders around shared challenges and opportunities in this century. More importantly, they are recognizing and acknowledging historical wrongs perpetuated by states on other citizens, and seeking to right those wrongs through bilateral and multilateral actions that are rooted in the wellbeing and equity of historically marginalized communities.

Their entrance into global public diplomacy is not new. Black women activists as non-state actors have been forming global alliances as part of social movements, particularly through their leadership in this era, of the Black Lives Matter movement's networks across the African Diaspora, founded and led by Black women. Now as elected officials, they are able to channel activism into policy and policy into diplomatic framework that is people and community centered, radical in its philosophy and transformative in its implementation.

## **Conclusion**

As swift as Black racial justice social movements have transformed global interactions, there has been an equal reaction in the opposite direction to co-opt or resist efforts towards racial equity. Likewise, many of the Black women elected officials who have been pioneering public diplomacy aimed at advancing racial solidarity have come under extreme forms of political pressures in sustaining this work. However, what is certain, is that Black racial inequity and its persistence in many societies still to this day is now

a far more mainstream issue that it was in the decades after the initial gains of the civil rights and decolonial eras after World War II.

What we can learn from the last five years is that authenticity is crucial in public diplomacy strategies, in recent years, and specifically on the issue of racial justice. Black women elected officials who have worked since 2016 to engage global publics around racial equity were first engaged in this work, on the ground level, in their communities. They were activists, advocates, and organizers long before they were political figures, mayors, vice presidents or prime ministers. They had lived what they engage people and communities around the world in.

Cultural ties are entry points to relationship building, but they must be rooted in cultural futures. In the discourse of Black women elected officials, public diplomacy acts were not merely about cultural displays, it was about exploring and testing ways to build more equitable futures around shared cultural economies that could build stronger states where people of African descent live. Instead of focusing only on shared cultural practices, these interactions sought to create streams for Black women entrepreneurs to access other Black women consumers around the Diaspora, for example. Instead of merely visiting grassroot organizations, these interactions sought to center them in new global policy efforts to press powerful nations to address climate change, as another example.

Lastly, who delivers public diplomacy, within specific contexts, matters. Finally, without credibility, public diplomacy aimed at diverse communities, particularly those of the African diaspora, is hollow. It matters to Black communities that Kamala Harris, Francia Márquez or Diane Abbott engage them directly and strategically on the issue of racial

justice even more so than leaders like Joe Biden, Gustavo Petro or Jeremy Corbyn who have also acknowledged the struggle for racial justice as political leaders. Their very marginalization in traditional halls of power as Black women elected officials translates to the communities who see them in these powerful roles. The extent to which that new power translates into sustained outcomes from public diplomacy is only now being enacted. But for the communities that have waited generations for recognition and change, movement after movement, advances and regresses, these small shifts in power, and seats at the table, are more than just symbolic starts.



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