

The “Open Sore of America”: Race and the American Congo Reform Movement, 1885–1908

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From the beginning of King Leopold II’s endeavours to secure the Congo Free State (CFS) as his personal domain, through to the legitimization of his rule at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85, the United States has played an important role in the tragic history of the CFS. This article seeks to explore the complex relationship between humanitarianism and race in the story of the American connection with the CFS and subsequent Congo reform movement. It will unpack the role of key individuals involved and their relationship with American humanitarians in the reform movement, arguing that while pursuing reform in the CFS, American humanitarians established close relationships and collaborated with notable racists who shared their beliefs on race and colonialism. By examining these alliances, it becomes evident that their efforts for reform were entangled with individuals who contradicted the supposed humanitarian goals. This article will also examine the reception of this activism in the African American press, showing that the response to the reform campaign was ambivalent at best, with questions raised as to why key African American activists involved in the movement focussed their efforts abroad in the era of Jim Crow in the US.

INTRODUCTION

The US Congo reform movement arose in response to atrocities committed in the Congo Free State (CFS) during the reign of Leopold II, King of the Belgians. Its aim was to end abuses and transference of the CFS to Belgian governmental control. Yet the US’s relationship with the Congo region pre-dated the reform movement’s activism, and racism was endemic to both the US recognition of the CFS and the “humanitarian” response to the reported atrocities. As the “Scramble for Africa” is often viewed as an exclusively European endeavour, this article will shed light on the centrality of the role of the US in both legitimizing and criticizing Leopold’s CFS. It examines the complex and intertwining relationship between race, imperialism, and humanitarianism in the US through the American Congo Reform Association (ACRA), the leading organization campaigning for Congo reform in the US. I unpack

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the relationship between race and US recognition of the CFS, and between ACRA activists and the racist politicians who helped their cause. I also addresses the African American response to the CFS, arguing that race was a key factor in the US–CFS relationship, an important issue for ACRA activists, and inextricably tied to the issue of free trade.

In early 1885, the Berlin Conference on West Africa concluded, having been organized to regulate European colonization and trade in Africa during the era of “New Imperialism.” Its outcome was formalized through the conclusion of a General Act, the terms of which were agreed by all the major colonial powers in attendance, including the United States.¹ For Leopold, it meant international recognition of his International Association of the Congo as government of the newly created CFS. As a consenting party, US diplomatic efforts helped ensure this recognition. What resulted from Leopold’s rule in the CFS was the mutilation, rape, and murder of the Congolese in pursuit of profit from the ivory and rubber trade. It was this recognition that provided US activists with a platform from which to launch their reform movement to end Leopold’s reign in the Congo.

From its inception in 1884–85, the US relationship with the CFS was based on racial terms, which superseded the espoused humanitarian ideals of ACRA reformers, and was inseparable from the issue of free trade. These activists were able to reconcile their relationships with notable racists, such as John Tyler Morgan, a US Senator from Alabama and an important figure on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, by adopting a paternalistic approach to their reform activism. In examining the American Congo reform movement, the intertwining of racism and economic interests in the US–Congo relationship becomes evident. Notable figures like Morgan, while paternalistic in their reform approach, were influenced by prevailing racial attitudes that justified economic exploitation. The deployment of humanitarianism, inseparable from free-trade considerations, often served as a veneer for advancing geopolitical interests. For this reason, it is important for scholars to analyse how race functioned as a strategic rhetorical and conceptual tool to better understand how the exploitation of moral and humanitarian language legitimized geopolitical interests, allowing for a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, economic motivations, and the manipulation of racial narratives that shaped the Congo story.²

¹ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the US. The US reserved the right to decline to accept the conclusions of the conference.

² The story of the US–CFS relationship has received some coverage within the historiography. Paul McStallworth’s unpublished PhD thesis was the first to examine this relationship from the establishment of Leopold’s colony until the outbreak of the First World

In the view of some scholars, humanitarianism and empire are inextricably linked. Rob Skinner and Alan Lester state that "humanitarianism was always an engagement in the politics of empire and nation."³ The hierarchical view of civilization that emerged in the nineteenth century became a fundamental tenet of imperialism and justified the global expansion project that the Western powers embarked upon. During the period after the US Civil War, ideas regarding the supposed virtues of colonization received much support in US political circles, as it was viewed as a means by which to enlighten perceived "inferior races" to the standard of "civilization" that, by this stage, the Anglo-Saxon race had achieved.⁴

However, public opinion changed during the 1890s when reports began to circulate regarding mistreatment of the Congolese. These attacks came from British newspapers and had resonance in the US, helping turn the tide of public opinion. This led to many US anti-imperialists joining the ACRA.⁵ It was not until this turning point, Jeannette Eileen Jones argues, that

War. Yet it has rarely been developed within the historiography. More recently, Jeanette Eileen Jones contends that Americans were behind Leopold's CFS project from the outset and that the prospect of one of their own (Henry Morton Stanley) opening up the Congo to trade and commerce brought Africa into the realm of US governmental diplomacy and would be beneficial to both. See Jeanette Eileen Jones, *In Search of Brightest Africa: Reimagining the Dark Continent in American Culture, 1884–1936* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Paul McStallworth, "The United States and the Congo Question, 1884–1914," unpublished PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1954.

³ Rob Skinner and Alan Lester, "Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40, 5 (2012), 729–47, 731.

⁴ During this period, there were many American activities targeted at moral reform. These activities involved a wide range of groups that included missionaries, the American Red Cross, the temperance movement, and the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, all alongside other associations formed to tackle issues on alcohol, prostitution, and the opium trade. The most comprehensive work on this period is Ian Tyrrell's book on the theme of American "moral empire." For more see Ian Tyrrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁵ For the purposes of this article, Cullinane's definition of what constitutes imperialism and anti-imperialism will be used when discussing who is an imperialist or an anti-imperialist. Cullinane stated that imperialism is "a vision for empire, and imperialists are those who entertain such a vision. Anti-imperialism is the rejection of an imperial vision." Michael P. Cullinane, *Liberty and American Anti-imperialism, 1898–1909* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5. Therefore, for example, Morgan and Robert Ezra Park, secretary of the ACRA, would be considered imperialists because of their views on empire, whereas Dr. David Starr Jordan, member of the Executive Committee of the ACRA and member of the Anti-Imperialist League in the US, was an anti-imperialist. It is also important to note that the picture is complicated further by the fact that some imperialists varied in degrees of racism in forming their views, and many anti-imperialists differed on definitions of empire; almost all of the latter were opposed to territorial expansion but some—including several ACRA members—were proponents of the spread of

Americans began to understand what was happening in the Congo; before that, most US anti-imperialists demonstrated little concern about the realities of colonial rule in Africa.⁶

In the early historiography, little attention was accorded to the racism of Congo activists on both sides of the Atlantic. This has been rectified somewhat with recent publications, in particular the work of Robert Burroughs and Kevin Grant.⁷ Dean Pavlakis's work acknowledges the racism that existed in the British Congo Reform Association (CRA), yet offers a limited interrogation of the relationship between race and humanitarian activism in the reform movement. Indeed, with the exception of a brief acknowledgement of racism amongst the CRA's "most stalwart fighters," the racism prevalent is somewhat generously described as "paternalistic at best and at times condescending." Pavlakis describes British reformers as holding the view that "Africans shared a common humanity with Europeans that entitled them to certain basic rights of liberty and property," with CRA literature portraying "educated Africans and those of African descent with dignity."⁸ Whilst this is true to an extent, this framing essentially sidelines the racism central to the transatlantic Congo reform movement, relegating its importance. Several scholars have claimed that the Congo reform movement was the first great human rights movement of the twentieth century. As a result, the absence of a focus and of the interrogation of race in this context is particularly glaring.⁹ A more nuanced understanding is required.

The one notable exception to this tendency is Felix Lösing's recent historical–sociological study on race and the transatlantic Congo reform

"civilization," often referred to as "humanity" in this context by those involved in the Congo campaign.

⁶ Jones. For more on the activism of anti-imperialists in the US Congo reform movement during this period see Michael P. Cullinane, "Transatlantic Dimensions of the American Anti-imperialist Movement, 1899–1909," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 8, 4 (2010), 301–14, 308–9; Cullinane, *Liberty*.

⁷ Robert Burroughs, *Travel Writing and Atrocities: Eyewitness Accounts of Colonialism in the Congo, Angola, and the Putumayo* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Burroughs, *African Testimony in the Movement for Congo Reform: The Burden of Proof* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Kevin Grant, *"A Civilised Savagery": Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884–1926* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

⁸ Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement, 1896–1913* (London: Routledge, 2016), 128.

⁹ For scholars who view the movement in this way see Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); Derrick M. Nault, *Africa and the Shaping of International Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Sharon Sliwinski, "The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5, 3 (Jan. 2006), 333–63; Robert G. Weisbord, "The King, the Cardinal, and the Pope: Leopold II's Genocide in the Congo and the Vatican," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5, 1 (2003), 35–45, 35.

movement.¹⁰ Viewing racism as the "ideological cornerstone" of this movement, Lösing argues that it formed the main agenda for what he describes as the first major human rights campaign of the twentieth century.¹¹ Whilst it may be anachronistic to consider a racist campaign as a humanitarian/human rights movement, Lösing's work highlights the depth to which racism and hierarchical views of race permeated this campaign.

Lösing's critique of the Congo reform movement's racist dimensions is persuasive. Yet, whilst he largely relies on secondary sources and focusses on the European side of the movement, this article focusses on the movement in the US, and contributes to the historiography in two ways. First, it examines the US movement through a consideration of government documents, personal correspondence, and newspaper reports alongside secondary sources. Second, it examines the African American response to Congo activism in the US through an analysis of the coverage of the issue in a number of African American newspapers. This approach helps us to deepen our understanding of racialization in US internationalism by highlighting the selective attention, geopolitical underpinnings, and construction of racialized identity within the reform movement's narrative.

The US–CFS relationship existed during a period of growing race consciousness among African American intellectuals and leaders. In particular, Congo activism emerged alongside the peak of the Back-to-Africa movement, which gained prominence in the early to mid-1800s and continued into the later part of the century. It was rooted in various motivations, including efforts to escape racial discrimination and establish a connection with Africa's cultural heritage. The movement gained momentum during periods of heightened racial tension and was influenced by larger movements such as abolitionism and pan-Africanism. It also saw an increasing number of prominent African American figures join with white voices in calling for the repatriation of African Americans to the African continent, creating an "African fever" to emigrate by the mid-1890s.¹² This growing race consciousness led prominent figures such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois to lend their support to the reform campaign, whilst also highlighting the divisions that existed between moderate and radical African American intellectuals involved in the movement.

The concept of race was understood differently among activists, although their understanding was still, in varying degrees, fundamentally racist. For

¹⁰ Felix Lösing, *A "Crisis of Whiteness" in the "Heart of Darkness": Racism and the Congo Reform Movement* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29

¹² Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 288.

example, Morgan, and ACRA members, such as chairman G. Stanley Hall and committee member Dr. David Starr Jordan, were at the more extreme end of this scale, evidenced respectively through their views on African Americans in the South and on eugenics (Hall and Starr Jordan were noted eugenicists), whereas Park and others held the paternalistic view that Africans were capable of achieving “civilization,” albeit under the supervision of whites. The language used varied significantly, both by activists and in the African American press, with some referring to Africans in biological groupings while others described them as cultural units (for example, Italians and “Slavonic Tribes” were races, as were “Africans”). In order to evaluate the role of the ACRA, it is, then, necessary to unpack the nuances of these intersecting and conflicting racial ideologies.

It is also important to analyse the response to ACRA activism in the African American press, as African Americans were some of the earliest critics of the CFS – George Washington Williams’s *Open Letter* and William Sheppard’s missionary work in the Congo in the 1890s helped draw attention to the mistreatment of the Congolese – and their criticisms emerged during a period of a growing realization of race consciousness among African Americans, leading to a bottom-up critique of the Congo issue in the Black press.¹³

This approach will also help to illuminate both the motivations of the Congo activists and the African American view on activism for mistreated Black people abroad in the era of Jim Crow. In order to achieve this, I examine race in the Congo reform movement through a narrative of the campaign. This approach contextualizes the experiences of both Congo activists and the African American press to provide a clearer portrayal of the racial dynamics at play during this period. In doing so, the article will use the history of the US relationship with the CFS and subsequent reform movement to link concepts of race, humanitarianism, and imperialism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the US.

COLONIZATION AND THE CONGO FREE STATE

The CFS was a complicated mix of competing interests, from colonial competition and issues regarding free trade and business rivalries to religious rivalry and secular interests. One thread that connected these interests was racism. Race and its intertwining relationship with free trade were a determining factor in US involvement in the CFS from its inception. Several key political figures played an important role in the recognition of Leopold’s International

¹³ For more on both of these figures see John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Pagan Kennedy, *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth Century Congo* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

Association of the Congo, including Morgan, whose political agenda led to his defence of the CFS early in its existence and, later, criticism and reform efforts.

Morgan entered the Congo issue through his relationship with Henry Shelton Sanford. Both shared beliefs on race, free trade, and colonization. Sanford was the former US minister to Belgium, a representative on the Executive Committee of Leopold's International Association, and a powerful lobbyist for Leopold's Congo project in the US. Prior to the Berlin Conference, Sanford exploited his diplomatic connections to acquire political legitimacy for Leopold's Congo project, and worked alongside another American, Henry Morton Stanley, who had explored the Congo region for Leopold.¹⁴ Sanford also worked as a translator of Leopold's letters to President Chester A. Arthur, as well as a lobbyist on Leopold's behalf. He successfully convinced the "New York Chamber of Commerce, the American Geographical Society, and the American Colonization Society to come out as supporters of Leopold's colonial movement by pointing to its alleged commitment to philanthropy and free trade" – an endeavour supported by George Washington Williams via a series of published articles.¹⁵

Sanford, Morgan, and others firmly believed that civilization and free trade were inextricably linked. Referring to the "open-door" policy that had been established with the birth of the CFS, Morgan stated that

all the great commercial nations at once began to look earnestly in that direction for a new and most inviting field of commerce ... with the high and noble purpose of opening it freely to the equal enjoyment of all nations alike. The merchants of Europe and America insist upon this equal and universal right of free trade with that country, and their chambers of commerce have earnestly pressed upon their respective governments the duty and necessity of such international agreements as would secure these blessings to the people of Africa and of the entire commercial world.¹⁶

Sanford had long espoused his views on the necessity of an open-door policy in the Congo, leading him to become an important figure in the evolution of US policies regarding the CFS. Sanford declared that free trade was the greatest benefit to the US and, in particular, to African Americans. He stated that

¹⁴ Stanley's citizenship changed throughout his life. Born in Wales, he then declared himself an American during the time of his exploration of Africa – gaining American citizenship in 1885 – before applying for British citizenship in 1892, two years after marrying an English woman.

¹⁵ Lösing, 211. For a detailed examination of Sanford's business and political interests see Joseph A. Fry, *Henry S. Sanford: Diplomacy and Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Reports of Committees: 30th Congress, 1st Session–48th Congress, 2nd Session, 26 March 1884, "'To Enter Africa from America': The United States, Africa, and the New Imperialism, 1862–1919," at <http://greystoke.unl.edu/doc/llg.con.001.01.html> (accessed 12 Nov. 2018).

the Congo presented a unique opportunity for the “seven millions of people, descendants of slaves who were forced upon our colonies by Great Britain and mostly imported from ... the Congo” to now find “a great field for their [African Americans] enterprise” in the CFS, hoping that “some colored Moses may yet arise and point out a new land of Canaan to his people on the Congo.”¹⁷ Sanford also stated that he believed the Monroe Doctrine to be irrelevant to US involvement in the Congo, declaring that Americans should feel proud “knowing that to our intervention and moral support is mainly due the creation of this vast empire of freedom – freedom of commerce and freedom of the slave trade.”¹⁸

Stanley was also vocal in his support for voluntary emigration. He stated that there was “space enough in one section of the Upper Congo basin to locate double the number of Negroes of the United States” but that it was “all a dream” as the “American capitalists ... are more engaged in decorating their wives with diamonds than in busying themselves with national questions of such import as removing the barrier between the North and the South.” Stanley opined that “the ‘open sore’ of America – the race question – will ever remain an incurable fester.”¹⁹ This idea of the repatriation of African Americans to Africa was popular in the Reconstruction Era – the era of what Morgan termed the “negro problem” – in the US.

Morgan was fervent in his belief that the future of African Americans lay in their repatriation to Africa. He believed it would provide an opportunity for African Americans to lead Africans to “civilization,” whilst also extending US economic influence on the continent. Morgan stated that the best place for colonization was in “a land that has been under the seal of darkness until now” – Africa – where

we seem to discover the natural theater for negro development, and welcome it as a door opened by the hand of Providence to the Africans who have gained the powers incident to Christian civilization while in bondage, and are now prepared to enter upon their inheritance with the assurance of success ... the Free States of the Congo open to the American Negro his first real opportunity to prove himself worthy of the liberties and civilization which he has been endowed.²⁰

Morgan delivered a speech in Congress discussing the “enfranchised African race” in the US and proposed the voluntary emigration of African Americans – a proposition previously forwarded by Republican Senator William Windom. Morgan declared that Africa “was prepared for the negro as certainly as the Garden of Eden was for Adam and Eve” and that African Americans would find “grand

¹⁷ “The Free State of Congo,” *Topeka Tribune and Western Recorder*, 18 July 1885, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* ¹⁹ “Stanley on the Race Problem,” *New York Age*, 13 Dec. 1890, 2.

²⁰ John Tyler Morgan, “The Future of the Negro,” *North American Review*, 139, 332 (July 1884), 78–99, 83.

possibilities" in the Congo region "if they were so kind to their brethren in Africa as the people of this country had been to them."²¹

As Morgan believed that the US bore an international responsibility to expand economically, these colonization plans would attract "unassimilable" African Americans who would be "instrumental in expanding trade between their 'mother-land' and the United States."²² For Morgan, the issues of race, free trade, and civilization were intertwined and inseparable. He regarded African colonization as a solution to the "negro problem," believing that the US should take a greater interest in international affairs and its rightful place as a world power. To facilitate this emigration, Morgan believed Congress should create a company that would provide official support for African Americans repatriating to the CFS and for the establishment of business and trade in Africa. Sanford stated that the CFS could be "the ground to draw the gathering electricity from that black cloud spreading over the Southern states which ... [is] growing big with destructive elements."²³

Morgan declared,

My reason for desiring this is that it may be able to encourage Negroes of this country who have wealth and enterprise but have not standing and never will have here to engage in trade in that country. Ultimately, I have in view a general immigration of Negroes from the United States to the Congo. They came from that country and should return. Here their civilization is wasted; there it might be devoted to the building up of a Government and country that shall be a credit to them.²⁴

Morgan's colonization views received some support from African American leaders. William H. Heard, former minister to Liberia and president of the Colored National Emigration and Commercial Association, sent congratulations to Morgan on his successful election in 1900, saying, "I do this as a Negro and one who loves Africa. I hope you may remain in the United States Senate and fight out your colonization scheme of my race. Yours for

²¹ "The African Race Problem," *Huntsville Gazette*, 8 March 1890, 2.

²² Lysle E. Meyler Jr., "Henry S. Sanford and the Congo," PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1967, 27.

²³ Morgan to Sanford, 19 July 1890, Sanford Papers, Box 26, Folder 5; Henry S. Sanford, "American Interests in Africa," *Forum*, 9 (1890), 409–29, 428, as cited in Meyler, 28 n. 49. Morgan was also instrumental in the founding of William Sheppard's American Presbyterian Congo Mission, which was co-pioneered by Samuel Lapsley, the son of Morgan's law partner. For more on Sheppard and Lapsley's involvement in the Congo see Kennedy, *Black Livingstone*, chapter 2; Lokangaka Losambe, *Postcolonial Agency in African and Diasporic Literature and Film: A Study in Globalectics* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), chapter 2.

²⁴ "To Colonize the Congo," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, 11 Dec. 1899, 1. McStallworth incorrectly cites this as appearing on page 10 of the *New York Tribune*, 10 December 1899. McStallworth, "The United States and the Congo Question," 194.

the success of my race in Africa.”²⁵ This followed a resurgence of support for the scheme in the 1890s, particularly among Black southerners, in a decade that saw plummeting cotton prices and the greatest numbers of lynchings of African Americans in US history.²⁶

Morgan continued to support the colonization idea, the CFS, and Leopold. He helped Sanford press the US government to despatch an agent in the Congo region and secure a position as an associate delegate at the Berlin Conference.²⁷ In 1888, Morgan argued for a scientific expedition to be despatched to the CFS as he believed it would open “the gates of Africa” for African Americans to promote American trade.²⁸ When atrocity tales began to emerge in the late 1880s and early 1890s, Morgan’s views remained unchanged.

ORGANIZED CONGO REFORM ACTIVISM

By 1901, American interest in the Congo region, at least at governmental level, had almost ceased completely, with the US government notifying its Belgian counterpart that it authorized the British consul present in the CFS to assume charge of American interests there.²⁹ Reports of atrocities that emanated from US and British missionaries in the Congo during the 1890s had been successfully deflected by Leopold.³⁰ Yet more atrocity tales continued to emerge. By 1903, opposition to Leopold’s rule was beginning to take a more organized form. The Congo Committee of the Massachusetts

²⁵ William H. Heard to Senator Morgan, 17 April 1900, cited in McStallworth, 193.

²⁶ Kenneth C. Barnes, *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2. It was during this period that the issue was discussed in the House of Representatives, where bills were introduced to appeal for federal funding to pay for African Americans to be transported to Africa to resettle. For more on the resurgence of Back-to-Africa schemes during this period see *ibid.*, chapter 3; Redkey, *Black Exodus*.

²⁷ Joseph O’Baylen, “Senator John Tyler Morgan, E. D. Morel, and the Congo Reform Association,” *Alabama Review*, 15 (1962), 117–32, 120.

²⁸ O’Baylen, “Morgan,” 121.

²⁹ McStallworth, 164.

³⁰ In 1890, George Washington Williams, a historian and African traveller, was the first to report on the conditions in the CFS in his work entitled *An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo*. Later, accounts emerged from American missionaries William Sheppard and William Morrison, as well as the American agent Edgar Canisius, who had worked for a rubber company in the CFS. For more on these earlier accounts and their authors see, in no particular order, Franklin, *George Washington Williams*; William E. Phipps, *William Sheppard: Congo’s African American Livingstone* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002); Robert Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers in Central Africa: A Documentary Account of the American Presbyterian Congo Mission and the Human Rights Struggle in the Congo, 1890–1918* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997); Stanley Shaloff, *Reform in Leopold’s Congo* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1970); Edgar Canisius, “A Campaign against Cannibals,” in Guy Burrows, ed., *The Curse of Central Africa* (London: R.A. Everett & Co., 1903), 63–80.

Committee for International Justice began publishing a regular newsletter agitating for Congo reform through the formation of an international committee to resolve the issue. The Congo Committee became the ACRA in late 1904 and recruited notable members to its organization, including Booker T. Washington and Mark Twain.

In April 1904, a memorial was presented by a "Conference of Missionary Societies and other philanthropic organisations" to Morgan to keep the issue of Congo reform alive in the Senate. Morgan may seem like an odd choice for the Congo activists; however, the activists wanted to work with a member of Congress who exerted influence on foreign affairs and maintained an interest in Africa. The memorial was subsequently referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SCFR), of which Morgan was chairman.³¹ It declared that the US government should be regarded as equally responsible with the European governments who signed the Berlin Act of 1884–85 for what they described as the "proper carrying out of that act"; they believed that the US had a duty to ensure that the Act was enforced in the way that it was intended, despite the US never having signed the Act, thus having no legal obligation to do so.³²

When presenting the memorial to the Senate, Morgan stated that its purpose was to pressure for US intervention in the CFS "for the relief of American citizens resident in the State and of the natives," adding that "he had not the slightest doubt" that the findings in the recent publication of British consul Roger Casement's report on conditions in the CFS were "entirely just and correct."³³ The ACRA was now considered to be the "representative in Congress of the ... Congo reform movement in the US."³⁴

However, Morgan possessed an ulterior motive. He was willing to work with the Congo activists and sponsor the Missionaries' Appeal due to his concern that Leopold's treatment of the Congolese would impact his colonization plans and deter African Americans from emigrating to the CFS. Yet he also believed that Leopold's mistreatment would be used against Congo reform activists and that they may struggle for support in the US, warning that "there are some who will use the cruelties in the Congo to deter our negroes from going there, and will not, therefore, be active in supressing them."³⁵

Morgan expressed his desire to continue agitating for emigration. In a letter to Edmund Dene Morel, founder of the British CRA, who coordinated reform

³¹ "Action in the United States," *Aborigines' Friend*, July 1904, 156–7.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ H. Mortimer Durand to Lord Lansdowne, 21 April 1904, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), FO 881/8414.

³⁴ Park to Morel, 31 Aug. 1904, Morel Papers, London School of Economics (hereafter MP), F4/15:44.

³⁵ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/15:106.

efforts with his American counterparts, Morgan stated that the original purpose of the Congo state was to ensure the

voluntary and unconstrained migration of our negroes to the Congo, as a nucleus of intelligent capacity to use the wonderful resources of that country for the ... upbuilding of the negro race. This was the real mission of the Free State of the Congo when it was first recognized and ... established ... [T]he perversion of this high trust by the "Sovereign" to whom it was confided is obvious and intolerable.³⁶

However, he also realized that his colonization project might be futile. Morgan stated that he did not believe it would not come to fruition any time soon:

If a general, free and voluntary movement for African emigration should be peacefully and properly organized by your race, in numbers sufficient to make it a matter of national concern, I will be of the number who will give friendly consideration to national measures for its promotion, within the just limits of the national power. I do not expect such a movement in my day, and have given little thought as to the extent and character of the assistance that the United States might give to such an organized movement.³⁷

Some ACRA members shared Morgan's ideas on free trade and race, and how both were intertwined. The free-trade principle permeated the ACRA's rhetoric throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet it was not as prevalent a theme in its activism as the issue of race. The ACRA frequently reminded the US government of its role, and the role of individual Americans, in the creation of the CFS, especially regarding the issue of free trade, having been the first country to recognize Leopold's rule in the Congo. Alongside this, several members of the ACRA were fully subscribed to the ideology of free trade. In particular, Dr. David Starr Jordan, vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League, a member of the International Free Trade League, and one of the ACRA's chief officers, was probably the best known of the members of the Cobden Club.³⁸ As Marc Palen has stated, "Anglo-American Cobdenites ... primarily advocated anti-imperial, non-coercive, commercial expansionism through international free trade." Such individuals were also Anglophiles who advocated a liberalization of international trade.³⁹

Yet ACRA activists did not consider imperialism to be as prominent an issue as that of free trade. The ACRA argued that if the US government would not intervene in the name of humanity and philanthropy, then it

³⁶ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/14:103.

³⁷ Morgan to William H. Heard, 2 April 1903, as cited in McStallworth, 193.

³⁸ The Cobden Club was founded in Britain after the death of Richard Cobden, the British MP, for believers in the doctrine of free trade, and whose largest foreign membership was in the United States.

³⁹ Marc Palen, *The "Conspiracy" of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalisation, 1846–1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), xxviii–xxxiii.

should do so based on the removal of free trade in the CFS.⁴⁰ On this, the ACRA faced more opposition from the US government. Both Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge had previously been advocates of free trade and members of the Cobden Club. However, by the turn of the century, both had taken a protectionist turn and became hostile towards their former Cobdenite colleagues and free-traders.⁴¹ The free-trade argument largely fell on deaf ears when petitioning the US government and meant that the ACRA had to seek an alternative message in order to receive support for their cause.

Despite shared ideals on free trade, the issue of race was the fundamental common ground upon which Morgan and the ACRA activists worked in their Congo activism. Robert Ezra Park, the secretary of the ACRA, confided to Morel that he believed the Congo issue was "not a fight against the Congo State alone, it is against slave labour in ... Africa," and that it was "simply the race issue in its most concrete form."⁴² Morgan believed that the race question – whether or not African Americans were entitled to "wield the power" of the "superior" white race – would also be an issue in the upcoming 1904 presidential election.⁴³ Acknowledging the inevitability of the US mirroring its European counterparts and acquiring colonies, Park stated that "Belgium is the awful example of just exactly what we do not want" for US colonial policy and practice.⁴⁴ The race issue would help the activists find common ground with Lodge, who had previously espoused his views on the purity of races when discussing the issue of interracial breeding in a speech to Congress in 1896, stating that "if a lower race mixes with a higher in sufficient numbers, history teaches us that the lower will prevail."⁴⁵ Lodge would later help secure a resolution in favour of US intervention in the Congo.

Race was also a factor in the makeup of the ACRA. Members such as Park, noted eugenicists on the Executive Committee in ACRA chairman G. Stanley Hall and Starr Jordan, and ACRA vice president William J. Northen, governor of Georgia, who had advocated for segregation in the South, all held racist views of civilization that were reflective of the period. The only significant

⁴⁰ "Humanity and the Open Door," *Congo News Letter*, April 1906, 7.

⁴¹ Palen, 112–13.

⁴² Park to Morel, 15 Jan. 1905, as quoted in E. D. Morel, Wm. Roger Louis, and Jean Stengers (eds.), *E. D. Morel's History of the Congo Reform Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 184.

⁴³ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/15:100. By "power," Morgan referred to what he described as the "racial rights of citizenship" and how "in two thirds of the 45 States, they are clothed with the power of the ballot."

⁴⁴ Park to Morel, 11 Aug. 1904, MP, F4/15:61.

⁴⁵ Hans P. Vought, *The Bully Pulpit and the Melting Pot: American Presidents and the Immigrant, 1897–1933* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 16.

African American presence within the association was Booker T. Washington. Washington had been invited to join the ACRA and responded, "I shall be very glad to serve you in any manner I can in calling the attention of the country to the awful conditions prevailing in the Congo, and I shall be disappointed if something cannot be done to change the present state of affairs."⁴⁶ Washington stated that "the oppression of the colored race in any one part of the world means ... the oppression of the same race elsewhere."⁴⁷ He exercised his influence for the Congo reform cause by personally calling on President Roosevelt and members of the SCFR. He also used his influence within the National Baptist Convention, the largest African American organization at the time, to take up the cause, as well as writing to influential white friends to raise awareness. Washington also toured the country, giving lectures on the CFS, as well as lending his name to articles on the subject that were ghost-written by Park.⁴⁸

Yet Washington's efforts were not always fully appreciated. Park accused Washington of being "not really interested in the Congo natives, or in anything else for that matter, except the American Negro and his school in Tuskegee."⁴⁹ Whilst Washington's reform activism was more detached in nature than some ACRA members would have hoped, the potency of the symbolism of Washington's involvement in the movement was not lost on Leopold and his supporters. Leopold tried to court African American workers to work in the CFS. His representatives approached Washington in 1903 to ask for his help in recruiting African Americans to develop the CFS cotton industry. In 1905, Leopold personally invited Washington to Brussels, an invitation which Washington declined.

Morgan continued to push his colonization plan. He issued a stark warning of the consequences of its potential failure, stating that white Americans and African Americans would have to deal with the "virtual extermination" of the latter if they refused to be "repatriated in Africa or the Philippines."⁵⁰ Despite these views, the ACRA knew that Morgan was a powerful ally. Park informed Morel that Morgan represented "the old slave-holding tradition" and that Morgan believed that "we [the US] are only going to solve the negro problem in the United States by the exportation of American negroes to Africa,"

⁴⁶ Booker T. Washington to Thomas S. Barbour, 21 May 1904, in Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Volume VII, 1903–1904 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 510.

⁴⁷ Booker T. Washington, "Cruelty in the Congo Country," *Outlook*, 78 (8 Oct. 1904), 375–7.

⁴⁸ Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the White Man's Burden," *American Historical Review*, 71, 2 (Jan. 1966), 441–67, 450.

⁴⁹ Winifred Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park: Biography of a Sociologist* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979), 2.

⁵⁰ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/15:101.

adding that "although he [Morgan] isn't at all interested in the negro on American soil, he is very much interested in him after he gets to Africa, and I suppose he represents a large and influential class of men in the South."⁵¹

Morgan was approached by Morel, who requested support for the transatlantic Congo reform movement. Morel stated that the CRA "wanted to enlist as much American support as possible" and mentioned a potential deputation to President Roosevelt.⁵² After reading Morel's *Affairs of West Africa*, Morgan declared no one was "more enlightened or philosophical ... on the negro question" in both America and Africa. Morgan stated that he believed in the "voluntary and unconstrained migration" of African Americans to the CFS in order to use its "wonderful resources ... for the domestic, commercial and governmental upbuilding of the negro race," which, to Morgan, was the "real mission" of the CFS "when it was first recognized and afterwards established in the Berlin Conference – not with reference to the American negro, but in respect of all negroes, everywhere, who might ever be citizens" of the CFS.⁵³ Morgan was confident that the British approach to reform would achieve success.

Aligning with the ACRA's aims, Morgan informed Morel that he believed the matter would be best resolved through an international commission "composed of Commissioners from the several signatory powers" to the Berlin Act. In a surprisingly progressive move, Morgan suggested that the US representative on the commission should be African American. However, Morgan stated that a campaign for the creation of a commission of that nature could only originate in Britain, which was at odds with the ACRA's campaigning.⁵⁴

Progress was slow. Morgan informed the ACRA that the general attitude of the Senate Committee was "how best to get rid of the matter."⁵⁵ Yet the ACRA remained grateful for Morgan's efforts in the Congo reform campaign. John Daniels, ACRA secretary, wrote to thank Morgan, stating that, as "the father of American recognition of the [Congo] Free State," the ACRA understood why Morgan was "bitterly disappointed" at what it termed the "unforeseen course adopted by the Congo government" on its treatment of the Congolese.⁵⁶ This followed Morgan's most recent efforts in the Senate, where he had delivered a "powerful statement" on free-trade issues in the CFS. Morgan accused Leopold and the concessionaire companies in operation

⁵¹ Park to Morel, 17 Aug. 1904, MP, F4/15:90–91.

⁵² Morel to Rev. A. McLean, 15 April 1904, MP, F10/9:833.

⁵³ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/15:102–3.

⁵⁴ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/15:104.

⁵⁵ Park to Morel, 13 Dec. 1904, MP, F4/15:295.

⁵⁶ "Association Expresses Gratitude to Senators for Congo Resolution," *Congo News Letter*, April 1907, 10.

there of exercising a “distressing authority” over the Congolese, “which they have proceeded to enforce without restraint, and without the responsibilities to public opinion” that would “check their avarice and greed in dealing with an ignorant and subjugated people.” In the ACRA’s opinion, Morgan adopted the position of supporting the Congo reform movement because he believed that the US, “by reason of its negro population descendant from Congo parentage,” bore a unique responsibility as a result.⁵⁷

The ACRA continued to request Morgan’s support. Following its recent successful campaign encouraging the US government to work with its British counterpart in pressuring Leopold to relinquish his hold on the CFS, Morgan enquired as to what the ACRA’s aims and actions now were. Daniels wrote in reply to Morgan that the ACRA was not a sectarian movement – a suspicion perpetuated by Leopold’s counterpropaganda throughout the reform movement’s existence, framing the issue as one of British and American Protestants coveting the positions that Catholic missionaries held in the CFS.⁵⁸ Daniels reassured Morgan that “Protestants, Catholics, Jews and agnostics gave it their aid.” Morgan was informed that “two of the strongest books [for the ACRA] were written by Catholics, Cattier and Vermeersch,” and that others, such as “J. P. Morgan, Lyman Abbott, Robert C. Ogden and others” had taken a strong stand too.⁵⁹

John Tyler Morgan died in June 1907 and the ACRA lost an influential ally. Yet progress had been made. Earlier that year, the US government, through the Lodge resolution, was formally urged to cooperate with Britain to pressure Leopold to transfer the CFS to the Belgian government. This annexation took place in 1908, and whilst Morgan did not live long enough to see the end result of his efforts, enough had been done while he was alive for him to have known that annexation was almost a formality.

AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESS

The US Congo reform movement was largely dominated by white Americans, especially in the case of the ACRA. Yet African Americans played an early role in helping to raise awareness of the Congo issue. In 1890, George Washington Williams, a historian and African traveller, published an *Open Letter* to Leopold, criticizing the CFS system that he had witnessed firsthand during his visit to the Congo. Later, William Sheppard, an African American

⁵⁷ “Senate Investigation of American Congo Concession,” *Congo News Letter*, April 1907, 19.

⁵⁸ Dean Clay, “David vs Goliath: The Congo Free State Propaganda War, 1890–1909,” *International History Review*, 4, 3 (2021), 464–65.

⁵⁹ John Daniels to Morgan, 3 Jan. 1907, as cited in McStallworth, “The United States and the Congo Question,” 234.

missionary based in the CFS, along with his colleagues in the American Presbyterian Congo Mission, helped to raise awareness.⁶⁰ However, until recently, the views of the African Americans regarding Congo activism has received little attention within the historiography of the Congo reform movement.⁶¹ An examination of these views highlights consensus and contestation regarding how the ACRA's efforts were received. Furthermore, it highlights how crucial racism was to the ACRA.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the African American press began to increase its coverage of the situation in the CFS. This coincided with an increase in African American readership more generally. Between 1870 and 1910, the literacy rate among Black southerners increased from 19 percent to 61 percent.⁶² By 1890, 575 African American newspapers had been started, and ten years later over 150 papers were in operation.⁶³ It was also during this period that the National Colored Press Association was formed.⁶⁴ Although a turbulent time for the African American press – figures regarding the number of publications in existence during this period vary wildly – they had a growing impact on shaping the views of the African American community on a range of issues, including racial violence and equality for Black people at home and abroad.⁶⁵

Yet Leopold's acquisition of the CFS was well received within the African American press between 1885 and 1890.⁶⁶ The *Huntsville Gazette* was

⁶⁰ As Lösing states, Sheppard was reluctant to join in the campaign against Leopold, stating, "Being a colored man, I would not be understood criticizing a white government before white people." See Lösing, *A "Crisis of Whiteness"*, 114–15; Kennedy, *Black Livingstone*, 161.

⁶¹ To date, scholarship has tended to focus on a narrative of a "white saviour," crediting individual activists and missionaries, and the British Foreign Office, for improvement in the Congo, as well as examining business interests and the role of propaganda discourses between Leopold and reformers. The African American perspective has largely been ignored. For more recent developments on African American perspectives see Ira Dworkin, *Congo Love Song: African American Culture and the Crisis of the Colonial State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Kimberly D. Hill, *A Higher Mission: The Careers of Alonzo and Althea Brown Edmiston in Central Africa* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021); Johnny van Hove, *Congoism: Congo Discourses in the United States from 1800 to the Present* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017).

⁶² James R. Grossman, "A Chance to Make Good," in Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, eds., *To Make Our World Anew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 67–30, 81.

⁶³ Armistead S. Pride, "Register and History of the Negro Newspaper in the United States, 1827–1950," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1950, 5.

⁶⁴ "National Colored Press Convention," *Washington Bee*, 30 July 1887, 3.

⁶⁵ Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 48–50.

⁶⁶ This assessment has been made following a thorough examination of articles discussing the CFS in several prominent African American newspapers during this period. The newspapers selected represent a wide range of geographical coverage, with the period from the Berlin

optimistic about its significance, believing the CFS to be the “redemption of Africa.”⁶⁷ These views were reflected in the African American press in the immediate post-Berlin Conference period. An article published in the *New York Freeman* by D. Augustus Straker, an African American lawyer and jurist, stated that it was inevitable that the European powers, along with the US, would bring “civilization” to the Congolese people, as they were “predatory, barbarous, and blood-thirsty.” One key component in doing so, according to Straker, was to adopt the same approach as that of Charles Sumner towards recognition of Liberia. Straker declared that Sumner’s demand of “recognition of the equality of rights due Liberia as an independent government” and the responsibility of the US in protecting Santo Domingo from the “rapacity of American speculation” meant that the US now had a responsibility to afford the CFS the same courtesy. He cited Sumner’s speech in Congress in March 1871 regarding recognition, in which Sumner stated,

Foremost among admitted principles of International Law is the axiom that all nations are equal without distinction of population, size, or power. Nor does International Law know any distinction of color. As a natural consequence whatever is the rule for one is the rule for all, nor can we do to a scattered, small, weak or black what we would not do to a populous, large, strong, white nation.⁶⁸

Yet Straker also offered a warning. Asking whether the “Great Powers” were interested in the “material prosperity of people of Africa” or whether it was a “lust of dominion and territory” that drove colonial policy, Straker warned that this justification – “the theory that the conquest of a barbarous people by a civilized power is justifiable through its benefits” – had been deployed before by the “Pilgrim Fathers in their warfare in America against the aborigines, or native Indians.”⁶⁹

The African American press declared its optimism regarding Williams’s trip to the CFS – one that eventually led to his *Open Letter* exposing the mistreatment of the Congolese. Williams urged the companies operating in the CFS to hire educated African Americans to work in roles of responsibility in their offices. Not only would these African Americans “more readily become acclimated than Europeans”; it was also hoped that “their presence and example would ... have a good effect upon the natives.” Williams suggested a recruitment call go out to the “chief industrial schools of the Southern United

Conference until the dissolution of the ACRA (1885–1908) chosen to provide focus, which, despite being a small selection, can provide a useful window into how the African American press specifically, and the African American community more broadly, viewed both the Congo issue and the ACRA activism within the US.

⁶⁷ “The New Independent African State,” *Huntsville Gazette* (Alabama), 18 July 1885, 2.

⁶⁸ “The Land of Our Fathers,” *New York Freeman*, 23 Jan. 1886, 2. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

States," which the companies decided to implement.⁷⁰ This suggestion would have appealed to many African Americans as, by 1900, 90 percent of them lived in the South.⁷¹

Yet despite his *Open Letter* being printed in several major newspapers in Europe and the US, there were three important factors that helped prevent Williams from achieving any success in transmitting his atrocity claims. First, the success of Leopold's counterpropaganda efforts in discrediting Williams's character dissuaded readers of the authenticity of his reports.⁷² Second, his untimely death on his return meant that his efforts were curtailed. Williams's death was widely reported in the African American press, which gave a balanced account of his life. Several publications repeated the stories of his infidelity that Leopold's press bureau had used to undermine his criticisms, yet also insisted that Williams was a complex character who should be remembered fondly for his contribution to history. Regarding his indiscretions, they opted to "veil all else from view."⁷³ Third, the timing of Williams's criticisms came at the beginning of the "nadir of race relations" in the US, providing a barrier for Williams in raising awareness and convincing the US government to intervene in the CFS.

One recurring theme in African American newspapers during this period was the focus on the trans-Saharan and East African slave trade in the CFS being abolished. This is primarily why Leopold's endeavours found general support within the African American press, as it was believed that his suppression of this slave trade was beneficial to the Congolese specifically, and to humanity more generally. Yet the press was also aware of the stories of mistreatment raised by Williams and others, and were not completely ignored. Despite some newspapers declaring that they believed the atrocity tales, they never really investigated further.⁷⁴

This coincided with criticism of the colonization plans of Morgan and others and their Back-to-Africa scheme. The campaign emerged against the backdrop of slavery, racial discrimination, and social inequality faced by African Americans in the US. Several organizations, most notably the American Colonization Society (ACS), were established with the goal of facilitating the repatriation of African Americans to Africa. The ACS founded the

⁷⁰ "To Go to Africa," *Cleveland Gazette*, 8 March 1890, 1.

⁷¹ Grossman, 67.

⁷² Clay, "David vs Goliath," 4.

⁷³ "Larph," *Cleveland Gazette*, 22 Aug. 1891, 4. "Larph" was the pseudonym of journalist Ralph W. Tyler, who was the private secretary to the proprietor of the *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, one of the most influential and prosperous daily papers of Ohio. His columns appeared in numerous black newspapers, including the *Southern Argus* of Baxter Springs, Kansas; the *Historic Times* of Lawrence, Kansas; and the *State Capital* of Springfield, Illinois.

⁷⁴ "Worse Than a Brute," *Cleveland Gazette*, 10 Nov. 1894, 2.

colony of Liberia on the West African coast in the early nineteenth century as a destination for freed African Americans. The primary focus for the emigration plan was to encourage African Americans to move to Liberia, although, as Ira Dworkin notes, “the Congo was occasionally under consideration” too.⁷⁵

Despite the scheme gaining real support towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, Liberia – and not the Congo – remained the desired location. Black intellectuals who were proponents of the scheme rarely mentioned the Congo as a potential destination for African Americans. Alexander Crummell, Episcopal missionary to Liberia, was pro-colonialist and, despite encouraging emigration to Africa, believed – by this juncture – that the future of African Americans belonged in the US and that “African tribes were better off under European colonialism than under the rule of American repatriates.”

Other prominent Black intellectuals, such as Henry McNeal Turner and Edward Wilmot Blyden, also rarely cited the Congo as a possible destination. The reasons for this are unclear but likely to be manifold. First, the impact of Williams’s *Open Letter*, whilst stunted by Leopold’s propaganda machine, did reach an audience outside those who read his work.⁷⁶ This wider awareness of atrocity tales likely cast a shadow over Leopold’s Congo project amongst even the staunchest Back-to-Africa advocates. Second, other leaders had deep connections to Leopold and the CFS. Blyden, for example, in his role as Liberian ambassador to London in 1892, had been “lavishly entertained and had been the luncheon guest of King Leopold” and was also a close friend of Sir Alfred Jones, West African trader and Liverpool shipping merchant, who was Congo consul in Britain.⁷⁷ Another reason may have been African American views of Congolese people. Black intellectuals, such as Henry McNeal Turner, spoke of the “Congo Negro” as the “lowest of the African races.”⁷⁸ As Johnny van Hove has observed, African American views of Congolese “oscillated between impotent innocence and murderous savageness.”⁷⁹

Yet some disagreed with the Back-to-Africa scheme. Lawyer Thomas L. Jones criticized the emigration plans, stating that they were “hostile” to the “best interest” of African Americans. Jones also questioned Morgan’s treatment of African Americans in Alabama, the Senator’s home state, declaring that “the lash, torch, and disenfranchisement are the political Jewels the

⁷⁵ Dworkin, *Congo Love Song*, 80–81.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

⁷⁷ Dean Clay, “‘A Clash of Titans’: Big Business and the Congo Reform Movement,” *History: Journal of the Historical Association*, 107, 374 (2022), 97–120, 107; Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832–1912* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 209.

⁷⁸ Henry McNeal Turner, *African Races* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000), 52; Van Hove, *Congoism*, 27.

⁷⁹ Van Hove, 209.

Senator and his party have put upon the necks of the colored American in Alabama."⁸⁰ This was also a veiled criticism of Leopold's treatment of the Congolese, comparing the conditions in the CFS to that of the US South, a recurring comparison that ran throughout the African American press during this period.

Criticism of the CFS and of Leopold remained, for the most part, largely muted. This changed in 1904, which also coincided with the creation of the ACRA. Up until 1906, the African American press mirrored the aims of the ACRA by calling for an international investigation into the Congo issue. After Booker T. Washington led the National Baptist Convention (NBC) to call upon President Roosevelt to intervene in the CFS, the ACRA was excited at the momentum building and was confident in making progress.

Yet not all reaction to this petition was positive. The *Broad Ax* in Chicago voiced its disappointment at what it viewed as a neglect of the issues faced by African Americans in the US. An editorial accused the NBC and its delegates of remaining silent on "the numerous wrongs and injustice which the Negro is subjected to" in the US, questioning why "no appeal was issued by them [the NBC] to the President" to assist African Americans in "race prejudiced America." It added that once the NBC and its delegates help to abolish the "'Jim Crow' car law, restores [*sic*] the ballot to the Negro, and prevent the White Christians from burning him at the stake, for their amusement, then it will be time enough to move on to Africa."⁸¹ The *Washington Bee* criticized the African American Baptists who gathered to protest about the treatment of the Congolese, describing them as "dumb as oysters on the outrages committed on their people [African Americans]."⁸²

This opinion was not universally shared. Other publications viewed Washington's endeavours differently, with the Indianapolis *Freeman* describing how Washington "once again captures the nation's capital" when describing his campaigning efforts in DC.⁸³ The *Cleveland Gazette* began to cover the CFS in great detail from 1904 onwards. Its articles contended that "Africans Are Robbed" of their lands and livelihoods, and described the mutilation of

⁸⁰ "Must the Negro Go?", *Washington Bee*, 7 Feb. 1903, 1.

⁸¹ "Echoes of the National Baptist Convention," *Broad Ax*, 4 Nov. 1905, 2. As Fabian Hilfrich has noted, the *Broad Ax* was an anomaly within the African American community in that it was a Democratic newspaper, when most African Americans at the time were supporters of the Republican Party. For more on the Chicago *Broad Ax*, and race and imperialism, see Fabian Hilfrich, "Race and Imperialism: An Essay from the Chicago *Broad Ax*," in Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher, eds., *Culture and International History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 250–57.

⁸² "Why Do They?", *Washington Bee*, 29 Sept. 1906, 4.

⁸³ "Dr. Booker T. Washington Has Once Again Captured the National Capital," *Freeman*, 3 March 1906, 3.

Congolese men, women, and children, partially to illuminate the story of the maladministration but to also deter African Americans from emigrating to the CFS.⁸⁴

The comparisons between the treatment of the Congolese and African Americans in the US continued. The *Cleveland Gazette* voiced its frustration at what it called “bleeding-at-the-heart sympathy” that the powers had for the Russian peasantry in the uprising of 1905–6, whilst ignoring similar treatment of African Americans, lamenting that “it wearies one – such hypocrisy.”⁸⁵ The *Voice of the Negro* expressed its support for the ACRA, encouraging its readers to send donations to support its cause. It declared that the ACRA was “stirring the country from center to circumference on Leopold’s infamy in the Congo,” describing Leopold as a “stench in the nostrils of modern civilization.”⁸⁶ The same publication reminded its readers in that “there are Congos and Kishinevs right here at home,” conceding that there was a “selfish justification” in its support for the reform movement as it hoped wider support for the Congo issue would “pave the way for meetings of protest in great European centres of population against American atrocities.”⁸⁷ After Senator Lodge’s resolution calling for US intervention in the CFS issue, the *Cleveland Gazette* speculated on the impact of a “curt reply” from Leopold, “telling this country to mind its own business” and to “put a stop” to the mistreatment of African Americans. The treatment of the Congolese, in the view of the *Gazette*, was “almost as inhuman as the wholesale butchering and crippling” of African Americans in the US.⁸⁸

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, comparisons were drawn in the African American press between European colonialism and US imperialism and treatment of African Americans. The *Freeman* believed that the US government was right in its assessment that it could not interfere in the CFS but differed in its reasons; the US government stated that the lack of territorial possessions in Africa meant it could not get involved, whereas the *Freeman* believed that the US should refrain on the grounds of its poor colonial management of the Philippines. It declared, “the trouble is that all of these Christian nations in alien lands are not there for the good of the natives,” but instead the “dollar hunting Caucasian” sought their exploitation for material gain, adding that the US must instead “stand with our own hands wet with

⁸⁴ “Cruelties,” *Cleveland Gazette*, 10 March 1906, 1; Sylvia Jacobs, *The African Nexus: Black American perspectives on the European partitioning of Africa, 1880–1920* (Westport, CT: Greenport Press, 1981), 90–91.

⁸⁵ *Cleveland Gazette*, 8 Sept. 1906, 2; 15 Sept. 1906, 3.

⁸⁶ “Pardonable Pride,” *Voice of the Negro*, 4, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1907), 20.

⁸⁷ “More about the Congo,” *Voice of the Negro*, 4, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1907), 14; Lösing, *A “Crisis of Whiteness”*, 113.

⁸⁸ “Mind Your Own Business,” *Cleveland Gazette*, 15 Dec. 1906, 2.

blood and let the maiming and killing go on, for we are in the business too."⁸⁹ In an editorial in the *Voice of the Negro*, its editor, Jesse Max Barber, declared his support for Lodge's resolution. Yet he also drew a connection between the mistreatment of the Congolese and the domestic situation for African Americans, stating that "the first thing Congress ought to do is appoint a commission to investigate the Southern part of this country."⁹⁰

Connected to this was the theme of African American unity. Prominent African American journalists such as Harry C. Smith, Fred Moore, T. Thomas Fortune, and W. E. B. Du Bois expressed a "need for racial solidarity concerning the issue of European imperialism in Africa."⁹¹ Washington's view of the "oppression of the colored race" also referred to a racial solidarity across borders, centring both radical and conservative African American leaders on the Congo issue in their opposition to European imperialist expansion in Africa. However, there was also a division concerning how best to respond. Whereas Du Bois and others supported more vocal protest and demands for higher education and political rights – Du Bois had demanded an independent future for the Congo at the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 – Washington thought a different approach was required, one that promoted an industrial education as a way of achieving equality with whites, with African Americans working their way up from the bottom. This clash in approach to the Congo issue specifically (and the race issue more broadly), as Lösing observes, led to Du Bois leaving the "field of Congo activism to his conservative antagonist [Washington]," which benefited the almost nonexistent criticism of racism, colonialism, and imperialism in the ACRA's reform campaign.⁹²

Yet in a departure from the ACRA's aims, Fortune, in a series of editorials, called for US cooperation with European powers to intervene in the CFS and for the Congolese people to become active agents in overthrowing Leopold's regime. Fortune suggested both peaceful and violent ways in which to achieve this. Whilst he stated that the Congolese had a "right to ... refuse to work for the Belgian exploiters," he also made a thinly veiled suggestion for the consideration of armed resistance. Fortune highlighted recent successes on the part of African tribes in fighting against European imperialist powers, stating that "the popular European belief that blacks can never combine, and can therefore never make an insurrection successful," was misguided.⁹³

⁸⁹ "Congo Appeal to the President," *Freeman*, 24 March 1906, 4.

⁹⁰ "The Congo Infamy," *Voice of the Negro*, 3, 12 (Dec. 1906), 541.

⁹¹ Jacobs, 90.

⁹² Lösing, 114–15.

⁹³ "Hostility to Europeans," *New York Age*, 13 Dec. 1906, 2; "Revolt among Congo Natives," *New York Age*, 19 Sept. 1907, 4; Jacobs, 95.

Several African American newspapers declared their approval of Belgian annexation in 1908. Yet they also warned that the world would be watching to see whether the Belgians honoured their pledge to bring justice and development to the Congo region.⁹⁴ Leopold's death in 1909 closed a chapter on the CFS for the African American press.

CONCLUSION

The complex, intertwining relationship between race, imperialism, and humanitarianism that existed in the American Congo reform movement highlights the limitations of humanitarian activism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the US. The scope of the humanitarian critique of both the ACRA activists and the African American press was necessarily limited – in terms of race – by the imperial world that they inhabited. This article has contributed to the literature on the limits of humanitarian activism in the US during this period. The US position regarding the existence of the CFS and the reform movement was conflicted. The ACRA's leading figures and Executive Committee were almost exclusively white, with the notable exception of Booker T. Washington, who joined soon after the ACRA's formation but took a disinterested role in its activism.

Despite containing some notable anti-imperialists, the leading figures within the ACRA subscribed to a worldview that perceived Africans to be “uncivilized” and “barbaric.” This was due to the gradations in anti-imperialist views during this period; for example, Twain and Park were not the same in every regard, but that they shared enough of the same ideas to work together in the ACRA helps to highlight the differences and similarities.⁹⁵ Yet this also ran parallel to the issue of free trade. Prominent ACRA activists believed that with the introduction of free trade into the CFS, the benefits of “civilization” would naturally follow. The utilization of racial ideologies to rationalize imperialistic ambitions in the CFS highlights the entanglement of racialization with US internationalism during this period, revealing a complex interplay of power dynamics driven by ethnocentric perceptions under the guise of “humanitarianism.”

⁹⁴ Jacobs, 102.

⁹⁵ William Appleman Williams's writings mark a watershed in popular thinking about anti-imperialism. He called the anti-imperialists of the 1890s “anti-imperial imperialists” to distinguish those who disliked territorial acquisition but had no qualms about economic dependency and dominance – a categorization that helps us to understand the gradations in anti-imperialist thought in the ACRA. For more on these gradations during this period see Cullinane, *Liberty and American Anti-imperialism*; William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1959), chapter 1.

This worldview led the ACRA to seek support from politicians who held deeply racist views. Although the activists' views were paternalistic and racist, they considered their message to be a humanitarian one, advocating the implementation of free trade in the CFS to alleviate Congolese suffering. Yet Morgan's views on African Americans did not present a problem for the ACRA in working with the Senator to achieve its aims. This was because they were shared by Congo activists as well as by African Americans, meaning that they saw no issue with the "civilizing mission" in the CFS; as Lösing observes, "the belief in the evolutionary backwardness and cultural inferiority of the Congolese" was shared by "black, female and working-class supporters of the reform movement" as well as by the middle- and upper-class members of the ACRA.⁹⁶

Morgan was the most controversial political figure that the ACRA worked with. Thomas Adams Upchurch has stated that Morgan "as much as anyone ... gave life to Jim Crow."⁹⁷ Roosevelt once described him as "wholly indifferent to national honor or national welfare."⁹⁸ Yet these views oddly allowed for Morgan and the ACRA to work together and he played an important role in the peak period of Congo reform agitation between 1904 and 1907. Morgan's Back-to-Africa emigration plan drove his support for the reform movement. He believed that Leopold's mistreatment of the Congolese would derail the scheme, resolving the "negro problem" in America.

Although considered by Congo activists as the "representative in Congress of the present Congo Reform Movement" in the US, Morgan was never an official member of the ACRA. He is not listed in the membership list provided to Morel nor mentioned in any official ACRA literature.⁹⁹ Morgan's central reason for this nonparticipation was that he did not want to jeopardize his impartiality when presenting the issue in the Senate, which he believed helped the Congo reform cause.¹⁰⁰ Yet he was undoubtedly useful to the ACRA. His position ensured that he had a potent voice in these matters, and having Morgan present memorials on behalf of the Congo reform activists meant that they carried a greater deal of weight.

However, this willingness to work alongside noted racists, as well as having eugenicists occupy leading roles within its organization, exposes a dark side to the relationship between humanitarian activism, free trade, and politics during

⁹⁶ Lösing, 122.

⁹⁷ Thomas Adams Upchurch, "Senator John Tyler Morgan and the Genesis of Jim Crow Ideology, 1889–1891," *Alabama Review*, 57, 2 (April 2004), 110–31, 125.

⁹⁸ Joseph A. Fry, *John Tyler Morgan and the Search for Southern Autonomy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 247.

⁹⁹ Park to Morel, 31 Aug. 1904, MP, F4/15:44; "Congo Reform Association: General Committee," MP, F4/15:22. ¹⁰⁰ Morgan to Morel, 29 June 1904, MP, F4/15:106.

this period. Morgan's racism differed to that of ACRA members. He was a champion of Black disfranchisement and racial segregation in the US. ACRA activists differed in that they were more concerned with Africans "civilizing" along their own terms yet still under the influence of Western imperialism. Park, Hall, and, to a lesser extent, Washington saw themselves as reflective of the aspirations of African Americans specifically and Africans more generally. Their paternalist framing of the Congo issue and their relationships with the wider African American reading public meant that they were often aloof to the concerns of Black people both in the US and in the CFS.

The racist views held by ACRA members also distorted their understanding of the history of Congo reform activism in the US and those whose efforts to raise awareness had generally been overlooked. The efforts of both George Washington Williams and William Sheppard were not greatly acknowledged by Congo activists on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰¹ Park credited Dr. William M. Morrison, a white American, for being the "first man who ... arouse[d] the American people to a sense of its responsibility" for the conditions that existed in the CFS. Before Morrison, Park stated, the stories of atrocities – which would have included Williams's and Sheppard's accounts – were "vague and distorted rumours of outrages perpetrated" in an "uncivilized" country.¹⁰²

This continued on in the makeup of the ACRA personnel, reflected in Booker T. Washington being the only prominent African American associated with the organization. Washington was able to use his symbolic power to influence the reform movement and took full advantage of his political connections. Yet he was essentially used by the ACRA, whose paternalistic views of Africans meant that the primary concern for the Congo activists was not the mistreatment of the Congolese but, rather, the type of colonialism that existed in the CFS and the absence of free trade there, which for them was a key component of "civilization." Nevertheless, Washington viewed Africa much in the same way as his white colleagues in the ACRA did, in perceiving it to be "uncivilized."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Whilst Twain did acknowledge Sheppard in his satirical pamphlet *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, Williams's contribution was completely ignored by British Congo activists, who are often at the centre of the "heroic narrative" of the Congo reform movement.

¹⁰² Robert Park, "Trying to Reform the Congo State," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 Aug. 1904, 4.

¹⁰³ Washington's views on Africa and Africans are more nuanced than this article can address. For more on these views see Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington in Perspective: Essays of Louis R. Harlan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), chapter 4; Elliot P. Skinner, *African Americans and U.S. Policy toward Africa, 1850–1924: In Defense of Black Nationality* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1992), chapter 6; Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), chapter 4.

The African American press was largely uncritical of the CFS in its early existence. One significant factor for this relative silence was Leopold's propaganda efforts. They successfully stifled notions that anything other than progress or humanitarian work occurred there.¹⁰⁴ When analysing its coverage of the atrocity stories emanating from the CFS, a recurring comparison to the situation in the CFS and the South in the US stands out. The common opinion of the African American press on this issue was that the conditions that existed in the southern US, and the treatment of African Americans there, was considered to be worse than the situation in the CFS.

Yet the African American press, once it increased its coverage from 1904 onwards, played an important role in pointing out the hypocrisy behind the humanitarian rhetoric of Congo activists. Despite supporting the ACRA, they regularly asked the question why activists were agitating for the Congolese to be granted protections from violence and opportunities for self-rule yet were mostly silent on the same issue for African Americans. The CFS and subsequent reform movement eventually led the African American press not only to criticize the supposed benefits of imperialism, but also to develop a greater sense of unity with other suppressed Black people in an era when African Americans were grossly mistreated in the US.

This maturing of opinion on issues facing Black people both nationally and internationally highlights two important issues. First, it shows a growing race consciousness among African American activists. Second, it highlights the complicated relationship between the predominately white humanitarian activists in the ACRA and African Americans more widely, and its press more specifically. Ultimately, it shows that ideas on civilization, imperialism, free trade, and humanitarianism differed greatly both within communities and within humanitarian organizations.

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¹⁰⁴ Clay, "David vs Goliath," 2–5.