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# HOW QUEEN MOTHER MOORE CONSTRUCTED BLACK COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITY

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## Abstract

This essay contends that Audley Moore (commonly known as Queen Mother Moore), an understudied civil rights activist, built both ideological and physical spaces of Black empowerment in response to the racism she encountered in the places she visited. After a brief literature review, this essay turns to the author's research on a 1978 oral history interview with Moore. Using this archive as a foundation, this essay follows Moore to three locations in the U.S.: Louisiana, Harlem, and the Catskills. This article starts with Moore's home state to elucidate how seeing Marcus Garvey speak in 1919 equipped her with the necessary tools to confront inequality. Next, it examines how Moore constructed a soup kitchen for African American students in Harlem. This haven served as a precursor to her later founding of the Eloise Moore College for African Studies in Catskills: an institution for higher learning, mutual aid, and above all the decolonization of the mind. By placing these case studies into a single narrative for the first time, this essay evinces how Moore developed her plan for autonomous, African spaces within America. Above all, this college marked the culmination of Moore's goal to bring freedom to Black youth by feeding their bodies and minds. Fueled with a vision for a potential utopia, Moore created literal and metaphorical communities outside American political and social norms.

**Keywords:** Queen Mother Moore, African-American studies, oral history, intersectionality, activism.

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## 1. Introduction

Oral history provides a storyteller agency over the past. The interviewee doubles as subject and object of the conversation, inscribing self into the record. In June 1978, Audley (Queen Mother) Moore, an understudied civil rights activist, sat down for the Black Women Oral History Project at Radcliffe College [1]. Over two days, Moore told her story, from her upbringing in Jim Crow South to post Voting Rights Act America. Moore offered a rich portrait of her life, providing details difficult to find elsewhere. Until recently, too few scholars paid sufficient attention to this document or Moore herself. I add to the conversation by focusing on Moore's desire to enact change by attaching physical places to her ideas about cultural transformation.

This essay contends that Moore built both ideological and physical spaces of Black empowerment in response to the racism she encountered in the places she visited. After a brief literature review, this essay turns to the author's research on a 1978 oral history interview with Moore. Using this archive as a foundation, this essay follows Moore to three locations in the U.S.: Louisiana, Harlem, and the Catskills. This article starts with Moore's home state to elucidate how seeing Marcus Garvey speak in 1919 equipped her with the necessary tools to confront inequality. Next, it examines how Moore constructed a soup kitchen for African American students in Harlem. This haven served as a precursor to her later founding of the Eloise Moore College for African Studies in Catskills: an institution for higher learning, mutual aid, and above all the decolonization of the mind.

**Aim of research.** By placing these case studies into a single narrative for the first time, this article demonstrates how Moore developed her plan for autonomous, African spaces within America. Above all, this college marked the culmination of Moore's goal to bring freedom to Black youth by feeding their bodies and minds. Fueled with a vision for a potential utopia, Moore created literal and metaphorical communities outside American political and social norms.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The life and work of Queen Mother Moore are understudied and underappreciated. As Erik McDuffie noted, Moore "remained largely shrouded in the literature of twentieth-century black

radicalism and black internationalism” [2]. Since McDuffie wrote that piece in 2010, more scholars focused on Moore’s role in the development of radical Pan-Africanist politics; in particular, Ashley D. Farmer has contributed a tremendous amount to the academic conversation. That being said, no one has yet explored how Moore sought to create a new African identity in America through her creation of educational spaces that embodied her intellectual and social ideals.

Often scholars note the importance of Moore but do not center their scholarship on her. For example, Sherie M. Randolph mentions Queen Mother Moore on a few occasions in her 2015 biography of Florynce “Flo” Kennedy. Notably, Randolph devotes several paragraphs to a heated disagreement between Kennedy and Moore about the participation of white women in a Black Power Conference. Unlike Kennedy, Moore believed that “Black Power promoted independent black politics” [3]. Through this episode, Randolph captures some of Moore’s separatist philosophy; understandably though, she does not examine the nuance or breadth of Moore’s career, considering that her biography focuses on Kennedy.

Like Randolph, Dayo F. Gore, in her work *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*, discusses Moore only in passing and about wider geopolitical movements. On a couple of pages, Gore cites Moore as a key example of a radical Black feminist who joined the Communist Party, but she does not devote more than a few sentences to Moore’s wider role as an activist or educator [4].

Admittedly, in his 2012 article *Dialogue Across Decades: BLW and People’s Communication Network-Exercises in Remembering and Forgetting*, Chris Hill analyzes Moore’s commitment to education; however, he explores her work through the lens of media theory. Hill’s call to amplify this discourse warrants praise. That being said, he does not trace Moore’s development through her life; instead, he examines a single case study and its afterlives – a speech Moore delivered in 1973. By failing to consult sources, such as the Radcliffe Oral History Project, Hill does not fully explore the complicated aspects of her long life as seen in archival materials.

Ashley D. Farmer most deeply interrogates the importance of Moore’s role in the development of Pan-Africanism. Farmer has published several compelling articles in popular and academic outlets, as well as working on the first book-length biography of Moore. At its core, Farmer’s work calls to “highlight the importance of constructing alternative histories of Pan-Africanism” that place women at the center rather than on the periphery [5]. Inspired by Farmer, this piece takes Moore as an example of how Black women absorbed, and then reformulated, Garvey’s teachings within their communities.

However, this essay differs from the existing literature by focusing on the development of Moore’s movement to make a true home for African Americans in the U.S., specifically through her deep connection to place [5]. This facet of Moore’s Pan-Africanism has not yet been discussed at length in the literature and thus demands further attention. But this aspect of Moore’s organizing also merits further analysis because it highlights the utopian ideals inherent in Moore’s activism. Although this article starts with Moore’s youth and introduction to Garvey, it diverges by pursuing how she internalized his teachings and then spread them by establishing sanctuaries of nourishment. Even though some have mentioned Moore’s involvement in forming the Eloise Moore College, none have underscored the importance of this institution, as a conclusion to her lifelong commitment to enacting political change through enlightening minds in a separate place, far from the racist society.

### 3. Results

#### 3. 1. Louisiana: Liberating the “Captive Mind” with Marcus Garvey

Audley Moore grew up in an environment of racial violence and she gained the intellectual skills to deconstruct these already familiar systems of oppression from Marcus Garvey. As a child, Moore was aware of her perilous condition but did not have the resources to respond to it. Although in young adulthood she proved to be an active presence in her community, she did not analytically approach her oppression until after hearing Garvey’s lecture. This section follows Moore as she developed her political consciousness after attending a Garvey speech in New Orleans. Indeed, he mobilized her to find liberation through raising others’ consciousness. Additionally, this experi-

ence opened the radical possibilities of Pan-African solidarity. Louisiana stands the beginning of Moore's quest to build a version of a powerful Africa within an oppressive America.

Moore encountered racism from a young age. With family members who had been lynched and raped, Moore recognized that the legacies of slavery persisted in New Iberia, Louisiana, her hometown. As Moore recalled, she "experience[d] things without being conscious" of their meaning [6]. Through this phrase, Moore distanced her unintentional younger self from her later mindful self. She emphasized a lack of awareness when recounting a scene of watching a Black man being dragged from a horse-drawn carriage from the slits of her window shades. Although Moore intuitively understood the horrifying gravity of this event, she remained powerless before it. Moore confessed that this persistent danger "always had somewhat of an effect on me," but as her equivocating adverbs indicate, she could not address the injustice in the streets without knowledge [6].

Garveyism gave Moore the language to ground her activism within the wider history of the African diaspora and, just as importantly, lend her a sense of self-worth. Moore even framed her life before and after Garvey. On that fateful night of listening to Garvey speak on a podium in New Orleans, Moore remembered how "a deep consciousness was awakened in me" [6]. It is essential to note, that before this time, Moore denied cognizance of the systemic racism of her surroundings; however here, she embraced her newly found perception. That being said, she employed the passive voice to emphasize the role that Garvey played as a powerful intermediary between herself and her fresh identity; she suggested the spiritual connotations of her political rebirth with "awakened." Moreover, Garvey offered to Moore knowledge of, and pride in, her African heritage. Because Moore gained no formal schooling after fourth grade, she adopted Garvey as her teacher as well as a preacher. Garvey revealed to Moore the richness of African people and their history [6].

Listening to Garvey did not simply awaken Moore to Garveyism; it showed Moore the importance of creating spaces of empowerment for Black people, separate from the white establishment. Notably, the New Orleans police department and mayor hoped to stop Garvey from speaking on the planned night. For that reason, when Moore, who was then working in a grocery store, learned about this she and others became "determined that the police won't stop him tonight" and collected their firearms [6]. Even though "the police had turned out in the hundreds," Moore and others were adamant: Garvey would be able to enter Longshoremen Hall and address the crowd [6]. Moore reported that when the police started to disrupt the speech, she and the many other listeners stood up and branded their guns, prompting "the police [to file] out of there red as crawfish" [6]. Even though Moore reflected upon this scene with humor, it remained a serious point in the development of her praxis. In this instance, Moore learned that she would need to challenge unjust forces of the law. Moreover, her description of cowed policemen backing down stands in stark contrast to the white men who brutalized the man in the carriage, and her in wider community, for years.

As this memory evinces, Garvey allowed Moore to reverse the hierarchical orders that dominated her life until then, offering her the possibility to reimagine the power structures that had previously dictated her existence. Moore internalized the emotional experience in this room and then sought to later recreate similar physical spaces of strength and safety.

With these lessons in resistance, Moore began her mission to liberate through education. Garvey gave Moore the necessary schooling that she needed to jumpstart her activism. Moore soon joined Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which had a particularly strong chapter in New Orleans, advancing her political training further. Within this organization, Moore not only deepened her commitment to Pan-Africanism but also to female leadership [6]. As Ula Taylor acknowledged, the role of these members "went beyond carving out an auxiliary niche for women" [5]. Moore continued to build her intellect and transform it into social reality. As she reflected years later, Garvey taught her that she could transcend "the terrible injury" of systemic racism; after all, "we as a black people had a great history of kings and queens" [7]. Discovering more about her lineage, Moore gained an understanding of her place in a larger struggle. By giving her a sense of power, Garvey inspired her to study voraciously and teach others what she had learned.

### 3. 2. Harlem: Feeding and Educating the Hungry

Soon after hearing Garvey, Moore and her husband planned to leave the South and move to Africa and find freedom [6]. Even though she did not move there because of her family's apprehensions, Moore still traveled and spread Garvey's teachings throughout the U. S. throughout the 1920s. After roaming across the country with disappointing results, Moore eventually settled in Harlem. Here, she created a soup kitchen for young Black scholars to eat and study. She saw the vital importance of providing an independent physical space for those in her community to nourish themselves physically and intellectually, thus offering an exceptional opportunity for forging an African American identity; indeed, she formed a sacred space within the brutally racist cities in the Western, Midwestern and Northeastern parts of the country.

Before moving to Harlem, Moore tried living in a few U. S. cities only to find the same disparity of opportunity that she sought to escape. First, she struck out for California, hoping to find a more liberated environment on the West Coast. But Moore found herself so "disillusioned and disgusted" by Santa Monica that she left within a month [6]. She discovered that in Chicago "the condition there was worse than we had in New Orleans" [6]. In a time of gerrymandering, Moore felt that she and other Black residents were packed together in the poorest neighborhoods. Indeed, her tour of the U. S. forced Moore to recognize that racism permeated in all four corners of the country. Garvey's promise of a liberated Africa stood in stark contrast with her experience in the U. S., which highlighted to Moore the need to create her own discrete spaces to achieve liberation.

When Moore eventually settled in Harlem, she realized that Jim Crow conditions prevailed in New York, even within supposedly progressive organizations. When Moore arrived in Harlem, she was shocked but not surprised to see that it was "just like slavery days" where people on street would feel Black women's bodies to test if they would serve as strong housekeepers [6]. In reaction to this, Moore turned to politics. After hearing the African American communist, James Ford, lecture Moore joined the party. Initially, Moore thought that Communism would be "a wonderful vehicle" to advance Garveyite ideology [6]. But Moore soon discovered that her voice was not heard within the organization: "I didn't have my right mind" because being a Communist did not allow her to put her identity first so she might fight to Africanize America [6]. Moore understood that she could not educate Black Americans if she worked under the aegis of a party, filled with racist members [6]. Her treatment prompted her resignation; significantly, this disavowal also marked a shift in her beliefs; she began to understand that she must create an autonomous space to extend Garveyite teaching on her terms.

In 1950, days after leaving the Communist Party, Moore formed a soup kitchen and in turn offered possibilities to the Black community; this act encapsulated how Moore provided a physical space for intellectual growth. Moore "started the movement" to uplift African Americans by raising their consciousness and bodies through food and knowledge [6]. Upon learning that two Black Ph.D. students died from malnutrition, Moore opened the kitchen for African Americans to nourish their bodies and minds [6]. With a pot full of hot stew, music from a mimeograph, and a typewriter, Moore supplied students with a space for rest and research [6]. She recalled that students poured in every day to this shelter. In this sense, she provided healthy food and higher learning when established universities did not. Aware that those in authority, whether political or academic, would not proffer African Americans equal opportunities for enlightenment, she imparted them herself.

The formation of this soup kitchen represented Moore's repudiation of the U.S. social, educational, and political systems that failed her before. As an establishment, founded and run by a Black woman, Moore challenged not only the Communist Party, but also the larger machines. This stop on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Lennox Avenue presented a positive vision for a different form of organization and learning in the U.S. Moore's time in Harlem supplies insight into the evolution of her idealistic beliefs as well as her practical approach; facing obstacles forced her to forge a new location for intellectual sustenance.

When Moore left New Orleans, she still believed freedom could be found in America. However, she soon discovered that Jim Crow infiltrated the Northeast, West, and Midwest as well as the South. Upon recognizing that even seemingly liberal cities or political parties could not extend a



sense of belonging, she founded her community. Her soup and study kitchen existence, as well as its success, demonstrated the possibility of fostering a thriving separatist community.

### 3. 3. Catskills: The “smallest college where you can get the most knowledge”

Years later, Moore took another step towards decolonizing the curriculum by creating her school for African Americans in the Catskills. In many ways, this college served as a natural extension of her informal soup kitchen in New York; after all, Moore built the institute to be another space of learning and healing. Interestingly, she planned that her school would serve a broader audience, including younger students as well as advanced researchers. In addition to emphasizing academic learning, Moore wanted to inculcate practical farming skills that could be shared with others in the U.S. and Africa. In a sense, she wished to launch a utopian community, one that existed outside the racist system. Even though her school burned down in 1977 and was never rebuilt, Moore’s vision remains notable for its anticipated role as a center for Black Americans to gather, learn, and connect with their heritage; once again, she united theory and practice.

Moore founded the Eloise Moore College of African Studies as an alternative to higher education, one dedicated to psychological reconditioning as well as intellectual learning. Although not opposed to integration in primarily white institutions, Moore believed that HBCUs should remain bastions of Black education [6]. Accordingly, she envisioned that Eloise Moore College would become a central location for affirming cultural pride, a place “where the people could come to us from all over the world to become de-colonialized and de-Negroized” [6]. Part of this process would entail therapeutic sessions. Although no evidence exists, that Moore read or even knew of Fanon, her outlined program resembled his work. Indeed, Moore promised that her institution would provide “the treatment and cure of oppression psychoneurosis” [6]. Moore admitted that she did not have the qualifications to conduct these sessions herself, but she sought to dismantle the all too real effects of racism by unveiling its groundings in culture rather than biology [6]. For her, this 254-acre plot in the Catskills would furnish students with the premier opportunity to connect and investigate their common heritage. In doing so, they would, as Moore herself did upon meeting Garvey, gain a sense of self-esteem and unlearn the curriculum they were taught.

Moore felt concerned not only about the mental state of scholars in the U.S., but also about that of younger students; thus, Moore envisioned that her institute would deliver services to high-schoolers. Aware that the American school system offered little to elevate its students, she planned to focus on training. Indeed, Moore proposed that students should not only learn about their history, but also gain practical skills like gardening, tending animals, and caring for a farm. She wished that this agrarian education in a lovely bucolic environment could eventually lead her students to shape better lives for themselves.

Even more, she hoped that her students could then take their learning to Africa and mentor younger generations. In this way, she planned to establish an international network of service. In an ideal world, her school would generate “a flow of interests and collective work, reaching across the sea” [8]. Here, her elegant phrasing emphasized the vast potential of global cooperation. Moreover, Moore’s Pan-African dream of mutual aid put education and work into conversation across the Atlantic; she truly relished the thought of a holistic, recuperative curriculum, stretching around the world.

In choosing to build her school in rural New York, Moore organized an idyllic space independent of the industrialized world where she had experienced rampant racism. Moore’s choice of this location epitomized her overarching mission to design an autonomous area for African Americans to learn and grow. Isolated from the segregated cities, in which she had previously lived and worked, Moore could finally form a nurturing society. The location of this institution intertwined inextricably with Moore’s teachings.

Just as Moore sought to supply a counterexample to public schools, where she provided a different vision for social organization. Indeed, Moore bestowed an attractive option in contrast to study at schools that devalued the minds or to inhabit cramped apartments that failed to consider the bodies of Black Americans. Moore provided separate communities with an abundance of bolstering education, fresh air, and healthful food. Moore’s catchy saying that Eloise Moore was

“smallest college where you can get the most knowledge” illuminated her belief in the power of the local [6]. In both its outline and its execution, this college embodied grassroots, organizing and captured her belief in the possibility of a utopian future for African Americans.

#### 4. Discussion: Finding Africa in America

In 1972, almost 50 years after she first heard Garvey speak in New Orleans, Moore took her first trip to Africa. Upon her arrival, the Ashanti people in Ghana awarded Moore the chieftaincy title Queen Mother, a moniker she used until she died in 1998. Even though Moore received this honorific at 74, the title conveyed perfectly the work she had already completed over decades.

Indeed, the name encapsulates the central duality that exists within Moore. The word *queen* suggests her transcendent qualities as a visionary leader of an African American utopia. The word *mother* implies her more practical role as the nourishing matriarch of her students’ bodies and minds. In both the soup kitchen and in the college, Moore took great care to ensure that everyone stayed healthy, so that they could continue learning not only about academic matters, but also about their self-worth. Upon reflection, the timing of Moore’s receiving of the title Queen Mother seems a fitting recognition of her life’s work and a celebration of her future legacy.

The Eloise College did not just represent the culmination of Moore’s growth as an educator; instead, it fused her ideals with her desire to bring practical change. Although Moore often prefaced her statements by noting her debt to Garvey, she interpreted and implemented his teachings in a unique and powerful way. Moore established her vision in hopes of transporting Africa to America, in hopes of finally making the U.S. a worthy home.

#### 5. Conclusion: Moore, Farmer, and Finding a Place in History

Midway through her oral history interview, Moore veered from the banal topic of conversation and stated concern for her legacy “I want the children to know... all my papers, all records... All that I am belongs to you” [9]. With this interjection, Moore sharply diverged from her description about getting gas money for her car in one of the two Carolinas. This remark also stood apart because Moore seldom mentioned the archives throughout the lengthy interview. It is almost as if the thought of preserving her memory surprised Moore, but she still felt the need to interrupt her own story [6]. However, this aside lent insight into Moore’s desire to be remembered. Even though this tangent is the only instance where Moore considered her effect on posterity, it warrants further discussion on the place of Black women in the archive. After fighting tirelessly against the erasure of the African American words from the records, Moore worried that future historians might also silence her voice.

But even in her word choice here, Moore seemed as concerned with others as with how they might later perceive her; her diction emphasized that she saw herself as a mother who would give Black youth a sense of worth for years to come. After all, her use of the noun “children” suggested her maternal position as well as her desire for young African Americans to know about her experiences and learn from them. Moreover, that she employed the adverb “all” three times in a single sentence highlighted the generosity of her spirit. Clearly, Moore wanted to reach as many young Black Americans and Africans as possible. Her concerns were perpetually global.

It is especially fortunate, then, that Radcliffe initiated the Black Women Oral History Project, so that scholars, such as Ashley Farmer, can research otherwise forgotten figures, such as Moore; that being said, much work remains to be done to ensure that the archive includes, rather than silences, women of color from the historical record.

Even though scholars, such as Farmer, have brought further attention to figures like Moore, the archive remains a space hostile to the voices of Black women. Sadly, this poor treatment is not confined to a retrospective reflection of historical events. Last summer, I had the opportunity to speak with Farmer and she recounted the disturbing persistence of racism in academia. During our interview, Farmer emphasized how she faced difficulties not only in finding resources to support her work, but also in libraries outside of HBCUs: “I had just come back from Howard University as well as archives in Wisconsin and California. I was struck not only by the difference in how I was treated, but also by the unfamiliarity of the archivists with what I wanted to research. I was also

thinking about how often archivists assumed that I didn't understand how the archive works as if I were not a trained historian" [10]. As Farmer related, she received the help she needed at Howard, or the *Mecca* as it is commonly known. However, Farmer rarely found such warm reception in Wisconsin or California; furthermore, no specialists were willing or capable of answering her questions there. Farmer received her Ph.D. at Harvard and stands among the best young historians in the U.S. Yet librarians outside of Howard did not take her seriously as a scholar because of her identity and the focus of her research.

The fact that Farmer faced these obstacles, while writing on Moore, stresses the relevance of Queen Mother's message even in 2020 [6]. Indeed, Farmer's research trips specifically suggest the continued relevance of Moore's belief in HBCUs. Although not physically excluded from these white spaces as Moore was, Farmer felt far more comfortable at Howard than at Wisconsin or California. Farmer has even had difficult experiences at UT Austin, the university where she currently teaches. Moore created the Eloise Moore College, so that scholars, such as Farmer, would avoid these situations of "terrible frustration" in integrated universities [6]. This underscores the necessity to read, write, and support Black scholars, just as Moore advised decades ago. Perhaps oral history not only provides agency over the past, but also an ability to change the present and future.

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