

Thomas Sankara Center for Popular Education and Collective Memory
Project Leader: Emma-Inemesit Richardson Sponsoring School: Barnard College
Country: Burkina Faso Estimated Dates: June 15 - Aug.30

The goal of this project was to create a popular education center in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso where people could go to learn about African history, Pan-Africanism and liberation movements in the Global South. Another important aspect of the project was the recording and documentation of oral histories that center Burkina Faso's historic revolution between 1983 and 1987. I chose to work on this project as a way to honor Burkina Faso's rich revolutionary history which has inspired so many people around the world. I noticed on a previous trip to Burkina Faso that in spite of the rich contribution of this nation to the struggle for Pan-Africanism and African liberation, very few books were widely available in the country that touched on the subject of Pan-Africanism and African history. The books that I was able to find were typically very expensive and well out of the price range that the average Burkinabè could afford. This is what led to the idea of creating a Pan-African library which eventually evolved into an overall popular education center as I began to consider what other educational mediums could be used to reach people, (i.e. films, debates, conferences, discussions, etc.) The issue that this project seeks to address is education and literacy, but it is also the overall global systems and structures that have led to the centuries long oppression of Africa and the African diaspora. Time and time again I have heard Burkinabè express that they do not feel that they truly learn much at all about African history in their school curriculum. This same problem exists for people of African descent in the United States and across the continent and the diaspora. Without a solid understanding of our history, where we come from, what our ancestors have gone through and why, we are not well equipped to deal with the current problems in our society and our global community. That is why I wanted to work on a project that both focused on African history education as well as the recording of Burkina Faso's history. Peace to me means dismantling oppressive systems and institutions to build new liberatory systems and structures designed to change the conditions of the most oppressed people. It means working to undo the long legacy and impact of colonialism that has led to widespread inequality and disparities in the quality of life around the world. This project works toward the creation of world peace by incorporating more people into the effort to build a better less oppressive world, by equipping people with the historical knowledge to understand why the world is the way that it is today.

This summer we were able to begin to make these changes through the events that we hosted. Because of COVID-19, a few aspects of the original plan had to be shifted. In the time that I spent sheltering in place in the United States, the primary contact at the University of Ouagadougou that we were working with retired. It became a significant challenge to find someone else who would work with us to make this possible. I spent several weeks meeting with university professors and working on a pitch for the university administration. I never heard back from the university administration and began to worry that the project may not work out. Another change caused by the year-long postponement of this project was that Jake Stanton was not able to participate in this project and I was the only student team member with an otherwise entirely Burkinabé team. However, because the local partners were so supportive and dedicated to the project we came up with a solution. We rented a house in the neighborhood of Cissin and spent the summer converting the space into a library and popular education center. We installed custom made bookshelves on the walls; we put up a projector screen; we purchased twenty library chairs, three big tables and one small table. After asking around for a little while we were able to find someone that based in France, Adik Koko Jean, that was coming to Burkina Faso who could help us by bringing French language books that are not otherwise widely available in Burkina Faso. I ordered the books to be delivered to his house and sent him money to buy an additional suitcase and to cover the extra baggage fees. In return we were able to receive sixty books from France. We announced our intention to open up a Pan-African library and political education center early on upon my arrival in Burkina Faso during the

month of May. With my team members Fabrice Simporé and Océan, I hosted an event on May 15th for African Liberation Day, a holiday founded by anti-colonial Ghanaian president and independence leader Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. We fed the community at a restaurant in the neighborhood of Gounghin, projected a film about Thomas Sankara, listened to music and then gave a couple of speeches. In my speech I talked about the importance of popular education and shared the goals of my project with all of the attendees. Throughout the summer we hosted two other events, orientations designed to give people an overview of what this project is and what our goals are for the future. At both orientations we provided dinner for each attendee. Now that the set up for the space is complete we are preparing to open the space publicly this month and to host a series of events including an event co-hosted by Pan-African rapper and filmmaker Elom 20ce who will be visiting Burkina Faso from Togo. I also have a friend and colleague, Eliamani Ismail, who will be visiting Burkina Faso and flying in from France where she is currently doing research. She will also be bringing in books for the library that I sent her money to purchase. Early into my project in May, I launched a GoFundMe to support this project, however, I have not yet used the funds collected from the GoFundMe. I plan to use the GoFundMe as a way to keep the project going now that the Davis Project for Peace funds have been spent. I would advise other Davis Project for Peace grant recipients to be flexible with their plans and to stay in frequent consistent communication with the local partners in the case of a global pandemic or some other type of emergency that could lead to a year long delay.

The goal for this project going forward is to form reading groups or study circles over time with regular members who will come together to discuss books on African history and Pan-African philosophy. As a recent college graduate I know how profound the impact of my academic experience has been. College introduced me to so many new ideas and challenged my thinking in so many ways. As a graduate in Africana Studies, I feel strongly that these intellectual conversations about Africa and the African diaspora should not be gatekept in spaces that so many African people do not necessarily have access to. That is why I want to bring these conversations, debates and this serious study out into the community so that anyone that is interested can partake and learn. Apart from having regular meetings with reading groups, I would like the library to evolve into a well known space that any community member can come to in order to freely access books. I would like to host regular film screenings at least once a week that are followed up with discussions about the film. In the long term this space will become a Pan-African think tank and incubator, generating community based and led ideas about how to build connections between Africa and the African diaspora and how to address the systemic roots of poverty and oppression

This project changed and challenged me in a number of ways. It was very difficult for me to adjust to life in Burkina Faso at first. I graduated from college around the same time that I was awarded the Davis Project for Peace grant and the last half of my senior semester as well as my graduation was marked by a global pandemic. Overnight I went from living on a college campus with my peers to moving back in with my parents on the other side of the country and barely leaving my house at all for an entire year. Coming to Burkina Faso after this was a huge adjustment, especially since life in Burkina Faso has hardly been impacted by COVID-19. I had to go from what felt like extreme isolation to a very collective culture that had not gone through any long term nation or city wide quarantine period. This project so far has taught me the value of patience and empathy. I had to be patient with other people as I presented them with my team's vision and learned that I could not build something meaningful overnight. I learned that making the most meaningful impact requires long term dedication and involvement in the community. I also learned to be patient with myself. I was not as social as I may have been prior to such a long period of isolation. I felt more fragile and emotional than I may have liked to at times. But I had to learn to give myself some level of grace. Other challenges led to unexpected costs that required me to revise my budget. For example, public transportation is not widely available in Ouagadougou. Taxis can only be found on certain streets and only stop on certain streets and are generally not available near residential areas. Buses are also exclusive to certain parts of the city. I was strongly encouraged to buy a motorbike and hire a driver to get around in order to get things done. I hired Omar Roumba as my driver but he also

became a very important team member with an interest in the project. I also got sick fairly often and had to visit the hospital several times. Those changes among others are reflected in the budget.

This project taught me the value of international collaboration in order to address the root causes of global oppression. It also taught me that working for liberation from colonialism and neocolonialism are prerequisites to achieving peace on earth.

- Emma-Inemesit Richardson

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