

In early September of 1960, Wangari Maathai, who would later become a renowned Kenyan environmental activist and the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, described arriving to New York City as “landing on the Moon.” Maathai arrived in NYC apart of the African American Students Foundation (AASF) exchange program. The AASF was founded in 1959 and was the result of a partnership between moderate Kenyan labor politician, Tom Mboya and American businessman, William Scheinman. The AASF sought to address the lack of higher education in Kenya while also preparing a bureaucratic class for independence. The program initially financed itself through a vast mailing campaign, spearheaded by civil rights leaders such as Jackie Robinson, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier. The program was created and sustained through the work of a plethora of different actors, especially the students themselves. In 1960, as the U.S. presidential election loomed, the AASF somehow found itself caught in the middle of both candidates.