



# Book Review: *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*

BOOK REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

A Book Review of *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* by Keisha N. Blain. An analytic review of a historiographical work centered on female advocacy and community change within the Black Nationalist Movement in the United States.

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Keisha N. Blain's *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* is a careful and extensively researched defense of the title's bold claim of the impact of women activists in the Black Nationalist Movement. Over the course of six chapters, the author effectively argues that women within the Black Nationalist Movement radicalized gender roles and developed various strategies replicated in future political and social movements of the 1960s, 1980s, and 2020s in the United States. Blain brings to life the fiery spirit of instrumental female activists by illuminating their hidden histories and charting their enduring influence on the Black Nationalist Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Lives Matter.

The introduction underscores how the common practice of defining the Black Nationalist Movement as Garveyism is an egregious oversimplification. Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born Black Nationalist leader, is often the looming central figure associated with the Black Nationalist Movement. Blain challenges the continually reinforced narrative that men were the central leaders in the movement. For example, the author critiques historians' regular reference to activists of the period as "Garveyites," as doing so only cements the paternalistic rhetoric of the era and discredits the various social, political, and ideological influences of women in the Black Nationalist Movement. Blain focuses on several women from the 1920s to 1940s who—despite having been very influential in the Black Nationalist Movement—are otherwise excluded from the scholarly record. The author argues that the absence of robust historiographical sources regarding influential women such as Celia Jane Allen is due to paternal dominance in the academy and scholarly outlets. In Allen's case, little of her life story survives except for one photograph (Blain 79). Consequently, Blain traces sources from Allen's journey through Mississippi, Chicago, and elsewhere with the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) to extract details about the activist's life and, in turn, present a more comprehensive, accurate, and equitable record of the Black Nationalist Movement.

Chapter one provides a detailed account of the creation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the empowerment it cultivated among those within it, and a biography of its founders. Amy Ashwood Garvey co-founded the UNIA with Marcus Garvey, which Blain highlights in her examination of the life of this forgotten figure of the Black Nationalist Movement. Without the financial and emotional support of Ashwood's family, the association may have never gotten off the ground, Blain argues. However, after the public spectacle of a divorce, Ashwood's activist career never fully recovered. This was a direct consequence of the social stigma associated with divorced women in the 1920s. The UNIA allowed women to move within its structure and develop racial pride, personal self-worth, and political self-determination uncommon before then. Blain traces the UNIA's history and women's struggles for autonomy by interweaving personal stories with an overarching chronology.

Chapter two begins with Mittie Maude Lena Gordon. After losing her son in a riot, Gordon moved to Chicago. Involvement with her husband in the UNIA later morphed into the PME. Blain's analysis of the religious influence on the formation of the PME and the organization's grassroots strategies for membership recruitment enables her to highlight broader themes in the movement of political independence, personal pride, and grassroots community activism. The women at the center of Blain's book developed leadership skills and unique tactics for political advocacy, such as grassroots organizing and the use of familiar meeting places. Restaurants and barber shops owned by these women enabled them to employ themselves and dispense information critical to fighting racism and racial violence in the Jim Crow South.

Later chapters focus on these women's political work in pursuing their dreams of emigration to Liberia. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression and New Deal, Gordon took a calculated risk in developing partnerships with prominent, white racist men to meet her association's objectives. Fellow activists highly criticized this tactic, even as it proved fundamental as a strategic shift for the movement to meet its goals. Gordon engaged with Earnest Sevier Cox from Richmond, Virginia, and Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, among others, to source funds and political capital for African Americans to move to Liberia in the hopes of less racial oppression and poverty. Through this example, Blain illustrates how fighting racism has historically employed a host of strategies and that radical approaches, in particular, should be understood within the context of their times.

In chapter six, Blain ties the life stories of nearly all of the women she detailed together to summarize the Black Nationalist Movement. Ultimately, she argues, the dreams that embodied the Black Nationalist Movement—achieving racial pride, economic empowerment, and cultural and political autonomy against white cultural institutions—never fully came to fruition. The aspiration for these dreams, concomitant struggle, and political strategies would live on in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter. In this way—and within the book’s epilogue—Blain reaffirms the extensive influence of the women of the Black Nationalist Movement on the movements for racial justice that followed into the future. “Setting the world on fire” was precisely what these women of the 1920s–1940s did by revolutionizing the roles of women activists and developing grassroots strategies that would alter the United States political and social fabric. The grassroots strategies these women employed included centering activities in meeting spaces that were comfortable and familiar to all community members such as barber shops, diners, and churches. It also included canvassing for volunteers door-to-door and generating ideas at the local level that could be expanded and extrapolated to larger national campaigns addressing such community concerns.

Notwithstanding the strength of Blain’s account, a shortcoming of this monograph is its limited scope. Incorporating the stories of additional emerging Black female leaders of the era, such as Grace Campbell and Williana Burroughs, would have sacrificed depth for breadth, perhaps. However, including such figures in Blain’s history of women within the Black Nationalist Movement could have offered a more comprehensive illustration of Black women’s impact and opened up vital questions about the modern roles of gender and race in the movements that followed.

Blain’s book exemplifies using the archival record to illuminate what has not been expressly written to develop an understanding of people who may have otherwise faded from memory. In doing so, the author extends a methodology used by other historians of racism and gender, such as Marisa J. Fuentes in *Dispossessed Lives*. Investigating the lives and actions of these community leaders through the gaps and traces of their records empowers scholars to explore what *other* hidden histories are buried deep in the archives. Compared to traditional approaches to scholarship in history, this methodology presents unique challenges and raises fundamental questions about historiography as it requires historians to fill in the details of what is hardly preserved in the archival record. Authors like Blain and Fuentes set a high bar for the quality and clarity of scholarship that employs this methodology.

In her artful and rigorous interweaving of personal narratives, Keisha N. Blain demonstrates how women such as Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Celia Jane Allen, and Ethel Collins made vital contributions to the ongoing process of transforming social, gender, and race relations in the United States. Without these women, the author argues, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, and future efforts to shift public understanding and dialogue on social inequalities and prejudice would not exist. Considering this, Blain’s book *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* proves to be an indispensable read to understand the enduring and protean spirit of U.S. activism through gender and race.


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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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