SET THE WORLD ON FIRE

POLITICS AND CULTURE IN MODERN AMERICA

Series Editors:
Margot Canaday, Glenda Gilmore, Michael Kazin, Stephen Pitti, Thomas J. Sugrue

Volumes in the series narrate and analyze political and social change in the broadest dimensions from 1865 to the present, including ideas about the ways people have sought and wielded power in the public sphere and the language and institutions of politics at all levels—local, national, and transnational. The series is motivated by a desire to reverse the fragmentation of modern U.S. history and to encourage synthetic perspectives on social movements and the state, on gender, race, and labor, and on intellectual history and popular culture.

SET THE WORLD ON FIRE

Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom

KEISHA N. BLAIN

PENN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

PHILADELPHIA

Published by
University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112
www.upenn.edu/pennpress

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
ISBN 978-0-8122-4988-0

Introduction

> We want to set the world on fire, we want freedom and justice and a chance to build for ourselves. And if we must set the world on fire . . . we will, like other men, die for the realization of our dreams.
>
> —Josephine Moody, "We Want to Set the World on Fire," *New Negro World*, January 1942

SET THE WORLD ON FIRE tells the story of how a cadre of black nationalist women—Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Ethel Waddell, Celia Jane Allen, Ethel Collins, Amy Jacques Garvey, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Maymie Turpeau De Mena, and several others—vigorously fought to challenge global white supremacy during the twentieth century. In various locales in the United States, including Chicago, Harlem, and the Mississippi Delta, and in other parts of the globe, including Britain and Jamaica, these women emerged as leaders in national and transnational black political movements, seeking to advance black nationalist and internationalist politics. At a moment when people of African descent were being denied full citizenship and human rights, the women profiled in this book utilized various strategies and tactics, such as letter-writing campaigns, grassroots organizing, and lobbying, to agitate for the rights and dignity of people of African descent.

Drawing on an array of previously untapped sources, including archival materials, government records, and unpublished songs and poetry, this book uncovers the previously hidden voices of black nationalist women activists and intellectuals whose ideas and activities differed significantly from their counterparts in well-known organizations such as the National

Association of Colored Women (NACW), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Urban League (NUL). While the activists and intellectuals in these prominent organizations were equally committed to ending racism and discrimination and eradicating the global color line, they rejected many of the ideas and strategies black nationalist women endorsed and often exhibited elitist views that caused a rift among activists. Feeling alienated from many of the ideas and political approaches of activists in mainstream civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the NUL and rejecting the Marxist platform of leftist organizations like the Communist Party, the black nationalist women chronicled in this book created spaces of their own in which to experiment with various strategies and ideologies.

Set the World on Fire centers on women leaders who were actively involved in several black political organizations of the period. Many of the women chronicled in this book were active members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the dominant black nationalist organization in the United States and worldwide in the immediate post–World War I era.[1] When the UNIA began to crumble under the weight of factionalism and conflict in the aftermath of Garvey's 1927 deportation, some attempted to keep the UNIA afloat and worked under the auspices of the fragmented organization to keep black nationalist ideas alive and vibrant in political discourse. Others chose to pursue new avenues. In 1932, former UNIA member Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, an activist originally from Louisiana, established the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) at the back of her restaurant in Chicago. In the presence of her husband, William, and twelve other black men and women, Gordon drafted the organization's mission statement, endorsing black emigration to West Africa, black political self-determination, and the "confraternity among all dark races."[2] Within only a matter of months, the PME grew from a small group of black working-class activists in Chicago to become the largest and most influential black nationalist political movement in the United States, attracting an estimated 300,000 supporters in more than a dozen cities across the country.[3]

While the PME and the UNIA represented the two largest black political organizations in which black nationalist women were active, they were by no means the only ones. During the twentieth century, the women profiled in this book were involved in several black political groups, including the Harlem-based Universal Ethiopian Students Association (UESA) and the

Peace Movement of Ethiopia, Inc., an offshoot of Gordon's PME. Regardless of their organizational affiliation, however, all of these women were key proponents of black nationalism—the political view that people of African descent constitute a separate group or nationality on the basis of their distinct culture, shared history, and experiences.[4] As black nationalists, the women profiled in this book advocated Pan-African unity, African redemption from European colonization, racial separatism, black pride, political self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency. With few material resources during a period of much economic and political turmoil, these women asserted their political power in various locales across the United States and in other parts of the African diaspora. This book highlights black nationalist women's political organizing in the U.S. North, Midwest, and Jim Crow South and examines their transnational work and collaborations with activists in North America, Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

If, as one historian has argued, the period from 1850 to 1925 was the "golden age of black nationalism," its decline did not occur after Marcus Garvey's deportation.[5] Rather, the collapse of Garvey's UNIA provided opportunities for women activists to engage in nationalist politics in new, idiosyncratic, and innovative ways. While historians generally portray the period between the Garvey movement of the 1920s and Black Power of the 1960s and 1970s as an era of declining black nationalist activism, this book reframes the Great Depression, World War II, and early Cold War as significant eras of black nationalist ferment.[6] During this period, women became central leaders in various black nationalist movements in the United States and other parts of the globe, agitating for racial unity, black political self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency. This is not to suggest that women's engagement in black nationalist politics prior to 1927 was insignificant or that they did not play key roles in earlier black nationalist movements. The post-Garvey moment, however, opened up unique opportunities for women in the movement to refine and redefine black nationalist politics on their own terms.

With the effective collapse of the UNIA during the mid-1920s, a vanguard of nationalist women leaders emerged on the local, national, and international scenes, practicing a pragmatic form of nationalist politics that allowed for greater flexibility, adaptability, and experimentation. The women chronicled in this book employed multiple protest strategies and tactics. They combined numerous religious and political ideologies such

as Garveyism, Ethiopianism, Pan-Africanism, and Islam. And they forged unlikely political alliances—with Japanese activists, for instance—in their struggles against racism, sexism, colonialism, and imperialism. As pragmatic activists, black nationalist women were willing to embrace "whatever seemed likely to help blacks live better lives in their half-free environment."[7] Given the shifting political and social terrain on which black nationalist women were fighting to combat racism and discrimination, their methods were diverse and ever-changing. For this reason, the strategies and tactics that appeared likely to help black people at one moment could be easily abandoned the next.

* * *

The emergence of this "golden age" of black nationalist women's political activism coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, one of the most catastrophic periods of U.S. and world history. In the United States, the Depression was especially difficult for black Americans, exacerbating already poor socioeconomic conditions that existed long before 1929. Although FDR's New Deal programs promised to improve economic conditions for all, black Americans received a "raw deal," facing rampant discrimination, disenfranchisement, and unrelenting racial violence.[8] The challenges black people faced on the national front were deeply intertwined with the struggles people of African descent experienced in other parts of the globe. As the United States, Britain, and other world powers inched closer to war in the late 1930s, black men and women were engaged in a war of their own. Although the leaders of these world powers claimed to endorse the democratic principles of "freedom and justice for all," people of African descent were fighting for human rights and demanding equal recognition and participation in global civil society.

Across the African and Asian continents and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, the impact of white imperial control could be felt. Despite the rhetoric of self-determination, global democracy, and freedom, British colonial rule persisted well into the twentieth century while the United States continued to exercise territorial, economic, and political control over people of color.[9] In parts of Africa and Asia, Britain controlled a vast empire, encompassing diverse territories such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and India. Throughout the Anglophone Caribbean, the lives of people of color were circumscribed by a racial hierarchy in which British imperialists

controlled the domestic economies.[10] Similarly, the United States was in the business of "empire making"—culturally, politically, economically, and even territorially.[11] The significant U.S. presence in Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, and elsewhere helped to "internationalize U.S. culture," providing an opening for U.S. policy makers to formally institute a system of imperial domination and exploitation.[12] These two world powers played crucial roles in maintaining the global color line, which placed people of color at the bottom of the social, economic, and political hierarchy.

The desperate conditions under which black men and women were living during this period often called for desperate measures. Not surprisingly, the women chronicled in this book were willing to explore all avenues, no matter how controversial or seemingly unusual in hindsight, in hopes that they might accomplish their political goals. Rather than assessing these women's ideas and activism solely based on the tangible outcomes of their political struggles, this book examines the principles and the philosophies that undergirded black nationalist women's actions. Moreover, it pays close attention to how black nationalist women, especially working-class and impoverished women, sought to achieve their political goals and explains why they pursued certain strategies, tactics, and methods.

* * *

The key figures in this book expressed distinct concerns and interests, as well as utilized diverse political approaches that were influenced by various factors, including their socioeconomic backgrounds, their personal upbringings, their specific locales, and their organizational affiliations. Regardless of these distinctions, however, they were all black nationalists—a term they often used to describe themselves. Similar to other ideologies, black nationalism is neither static nor monolithic. Indeed, it has taken on several different forms and manifestations—such as cultural nationalism, economic nationalism, and religious nationalism—at various historical moments. Notwithstanding its complexity, the term provides a relevant theoretical framework and a crucial starting point for understanding the political ideas and activism of the women chronicled here. Indeed, the black women activists in this book embraced racial separatism, black pride and unity, political self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency. These core tenets, with varying degrees of emphasis at certain historical moments,

have been fundamental to understanding black nationalism since its earliest articulations.[13]

From Maria Stewart's and David Walker's writings and speeches in the 1830s to the political work and expressions of Audley "Queen Mother" Moore, Malcolm X, and other black activists and intellectuals during the Black Power era, what has distinguished black nationalist thought in the United States from other political ideologies is a militant response to white supremacy, a recognition of the distinctiveness of black culture and history, and an emphasis on how people who represent a "nation within a nation" ought to create for themselves autonomous spaces in which to advance their own social, political, and economic goals. At the heart of black nationalism is a recognition that integration, were it ever to be realized, cannot fully address the persistent challenges of people of African descent in the United States and other parts of the diaspora. To view black nationalism as an oppositional stance in relation to integration does not imply that activists operated within a rigid ideological binary. Indeed, as history has repeatedly shown us, political ideas and activities are contingent, fluid, and disorderly.[14] To that end, the women in this book often pushed beyond the perceived boundaries of black nationalism to craft an idiosyncratic political praxis born out of necessity.

Many of the women in this book were, in varying ways, drawn to black nationalism through Garveyism—the teachings and principles of Marcus Garvey. In addition to Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and Ethel Waddell, other women, such as UNIA cofounder Amy Ashwood (Garvey's first wife), UNIA national organizer Maymie De Mena, and Pan-Africanist feminist Amy Jacques Garvey (Garvey's second wife), were active in the Garvey movement during the 1920s. In the post-Garvey era, some remained involved in the fragmented UNIA, whereas others moved in different directions. For this reason, all of the black nationalist women in this book should not be classified *solely* as "Garveyites"—a term that reinforces the ideological ties to Garvey yet does not account for the diverse political and religious traditions on which black nationalist women drew.

Indeed, while this book joins an ongoing scholarly effort to assess the global impact and enduring legacies of Garveyism—as an ideology and political organizing tool—it moves beyond Garveyism as the sole or even primary prism through which women leaders crafted a political response to global white supremacy.[15] *Set the World on Fire* highlights women's efforts to formulate a black nationalist politics that often took on new

shapes and meanings during the post-Garvey era. Black nationalist women's political ideas and activities were not simply efforts to maintain or even to extend Garveyism but often to depart from it entirely. In the absence of Garvey's direct leadership and influence, the expressions of black nationalism that emerged during the post-1927 era sometimes resembled Garveyism but at other times did not.

Similar to many of the black nationalists who preceded them, the women in this book drew on both radical and conservative traditions to formulate their political ideas and praxis. On one hand, black nationalist women embraced heteronormative gender politics and generally advocated civilizationist racial uplift views—often cloaked in Christian rhetoric. Whereas black women radicals in the Communist Party endorsed anticapitalism, black nationalist women promoted black capitalism, in the belief that the growth of black-owned businesses would bolster economic self-sufficiency and thus enrich and sustain black life.[16] On the other hand, black nationalist women embraced many ideas that challenged the status quo. Black nationalist women's endorsement of Afro-Asian solidarity, call for black separatism, support of African liberation struggles, and anti-imperialist critique of U.S. foreign policy—to name a few—were all ideas that were considered "radical" in relation to mainstream black political discourses of the twentieth century. More specifically, their ideas and activism reflected what political sociologist Craig Calhoun describes as tactical radicalism—an emphasis on "immediate change" and a willingness to use "extreme measures" to achieve their political goals.[17]

In their willingness to use such methods, black nationalist women leaders made a number of political missteps and errors in judgment and often pursued questionable alliances with individuals who did not share their vision. For instance, because black nationalist women generally embraced a biologically based understanding of race, they were willing to form political collaborations with well-known white supremacists in hopes of advancing their political goals. In the short term, these alliances proved somewhat advantageous—on several occasions, the white supremacists with whom these women collaborated used their political influence and material resources to support black emigration efforts. In the long term, however, these controversial alliances hindered black nationalist women's political goals. By forging these unusual alliances—however practical they appeared to them to be at the time—black nationalist women undermined their credibility in the eyes of many of their contemporaries. Yet understanding why

they would take such measures—what, in their ideological makeup, gave them license to do so—is one of the fundamental goals of this book.

* * *

Perhaps the most important aspect of black nationalist women's political life was their interest in and commitment to black internationalism. Building upon a long and rich tradition and history dating back to the Age of Revolution, black nationalist women maintained a global racial consciousness and commitment to universal emancipation.[18] These women understood that the struggle for black rights in the United States as well as the fight for black political self-determination could not be divorced from the global struggles for freedom in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and other parts of the globe. Using a variety of avenues, including journalism, print media, and overseas travel, black nationalist women articulated and disseminated global visions of freedom and sought to build transnational and transracial alliances with other people of color in order to secure civil and human rights.

While much of the scholarship on black internationalism centers on the ideas and political activities of towering individuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and C. L. R. James, this book emphasizes the significant yet largely underappreciated contributions of a diverse group of women activists and intellectuals. *Set the World on Fire* foregrounds the writings, speeches, and activism of black women leaders of all walks of life and explores how gender and gender relations shaped internationalist movements and discourses.[19] Moreover, this book highlights the interplay between national and geopolitical issues and makes visible the diverse and creative ways black nationalist women leaders built transnational networks with a diverse group of activists across the globe.

Whereas conventional historical narratives tend to privilege the political activities of the black middle class and elite, this book pays particular attention to the internationalist activities of working-poor women activists. It foregrounds the ideas and activism of impoverished black women activists and intellectuals with limited financial resources and, as a consequence, limited mobility. Amid the social and political upheavals of the twentieth century, impoverished black women activists and intellectuals devised a range of creative strategies to advance their internationalist agenda. These women often engaged in grassroots internationalism, articulating global

visions of freedom and practicing black internationalist politics on the local level. Although many of the women in this book could not afford overseas travel, they sought to advance internationalism through their writings, community work, and local collaborations with men and women from various parts of the globe. By centering these women's grassroots internationalist politics, this book sheds new light on the crucial role working-poor women played in black internationalist movements of the twentieth century.

Similar to other black women internationalists of the period, the women in this book often articulated a proto-feminist consciousness—an opposition to gender inequality that predated the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars often disagree on the precise terminology appropriate for describing black nationalist women's positions on women and gender issues. Yet, one thing is certain: black nationalist women during the early to mid-twentieth century often exhibited feminist beliefs and employed strategies that foreshadowed modern feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.[20] These women sought to empower other women in the African diaspora and rejected sexist perceptions of women as intellectually inferior to men.[21] They articulated a critique of male supremacy and attempted to change the patriarchal structures of the organizations in which they were active.[22]

Despite these overt expressions of feminism, black nationalist women's gender and sexual politics were far more complex. As black feminist theorist Joy James reminds us, black women activists and intellectuals were "not uniformly progressive." Indeed, black women's articulations of what James describes as "radical or revolutionary black feminism" stood side by side with "liberal and conservative feminisms and antiracism."[23] Not surprisingly, the women in this book critiqued male chauvinism and patriarchy, on one hand, and embraced traditionally conservative perspectives on gender and sexuality, on the other. In many ways, black nationalist women's ideological complexity mirrors the ideas and experiences of nationalist women in postcolonial Middle Eastern and South Asian societies.[24] While women in black nationalist movements during the early to mid-twentieth century found ways to challenge male patriarchy and even attempted to expand opportunities for women, their activities were still circumscribed by the masculinist traditions of nationalist discourses and movements in which black men were fighting to prove their manhood—often at the expense of women's rights and autonomy.[25]

* * *

At the heart of this book is an exploration of how black nationalist women "on the margins" struggled to make their way to the center—that is, the forefront of political movements for global black liberation.[26] These women, representing a subordinate group within the global racial and gender hierarchies, advocated immediate social changes and in so doing laid the political groundwork for a new generation of black activists and intellectuals engaged in struggles for freedom during the modern Civil Rights–Black Power era of the 1960s and 1970s. In their efforts to eradicate the global color line, the women profiled in this book adopted a practical and pragmatic approach to local, national, and global politics.[27] From the early twentieth century to the 1950s, these women devised a range of strategies and tactics, drew on an array of religious and political ideologies, and collaborated with activists and politicians of various political persuasions. Often with limited material resources and in the face of much opposition, these women attempted to transform American society and sought to improve conditions for people of color all across the globe.

Their stories capture the depth and complexities of the global black freedom struggle. Indeed, they illustrate the range of protest strategies and tactics individuals have employed in their efforts to resist domination, degradation, and exploitation. In addition, they enrich our understandings of how black nationalist women, particularly members of the working poor and individuals with limited formal education, have functioned as key leaders, theorists, and strategists at the grassroots, national, and international levels. What follows is an account of these women's stories in all their quirkiness, complexities, and paradoxes—filled with moments of tragedy and defeat but also filled with moments of triumph and hope.