role in (trans)forming an era. For these reasons, this text is a wonderful addition to the growing body of literature on Black Power.

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*Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*, by Keisha N. Blain. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. $34.95, cloth. 255 pages.

Reviewed by Errol A. Henderson

This insightful study is the first book-length treatment of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), one of several successor organizations to Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and “the largest black nationalist organization established by a woman in the United States” (48). The PME’s Black nationalism, like the UNIA’s, focused on “racial pride, black political self-determination, racial separatism, African heritage, economic self-sufficiency, and African redemption from European colonization” (10); but the PME put greater emphasis on women’s leadership and autonomy. Blain chronicles the PME from its founding in 1932 to its “gradual demise” in the mid-1960s (193). She aims to show “how black nationalist women, particularly members of the working poor” and those “with limited formal education,” became “key leaders, theorists, and strategists at the grassroots, national, and international levels” (10). To do this, she draws from primary and secondary sources, archival information, and government documents.

The main focus is the PME’s founder, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, the former “lady president” of a UNIA division in Chicago who, along with 13 others, organized the PME in her restaurant apartment. The PME “launched a vibrant emigration movement” including “an unprecedented petition with signatures of an estimated 400,000 black Americans willing to leave the country,” which was sent to President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, “along with a request for federal aid to support emigration” (48). In 1939, the PME lobbied for the Greater Liberia Bill that sought repatriation of Black Americans to Liberia, a measure sponsored by the notorious racist Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi. Like its successor legislation proposed by Senator William Langer of North Dakota, Bilbo’s Greater Liberia Bill never made it off the Senate floor. Still, the notoriety surrounding both bills enhanced the prominence of the PME and Gordon.
Blain provides incisive narratives of prominent UNIA women such as Amy Ashwood, Amy Jacques, Henrietta Vinton Davis, Maymie Leona Turpeau De Mena, Adelaide Casely Hayford, and Laura Adorkor Kofey. The heart of the book, however, focuses on Gordon. From her early childhood in Louisiana to her upbringing in Arkansas, Gordon’s father, a Colored Methodist Episcopal minister, exposed her to the writings of African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Henry McNeal Turner—a prominent emigrationist, “laying the foundation for her decision to embrace Garveyism later in life” (49). Gordon’s “life was forever shattered” by the 1917 racist pogrom in East St. Louis, Illinois, a town she had moved to a few years earlier as a widowed mother (51). Her 10-year-old son, John, died from injuries he sustained during the pogrom. Garvey publicly denounced the “riot” as “one of the bloodiest outrages of mankind” (52).

Gordon subsequently relocated to Chicago, where she remarried in 1920 and, by 1923, began attending UNIA meetings with her husband. She quickly became “lady president” of the UNIA Chicago division. But while having authority over the women’s division, “the lady president was expected to answer to the male president, who had the final say and often amended women’s reports to the division at large” (52). Although Blain is clear that “Black women did not find equal opportunities to men in the UNIA,” she contends that “the organization was, in some ways, one of the most progressive black political organizations of the period—when compared to other race organizations in which women were often confined to behind-the-scenes roles” (18). Blain attributes this relatively progressive stance to the initiatives of prominent UNIA women, and important (albeit obscure) grassroots “proto-feminist” members whose voices resonate throughout her book. Blain reports that “UNIA women openly expressed their growing sense of dissatisfaction in a male-dominated and masculinist organization and refused to sit quietly as Garvey and other men reinforced traditional gender constructions that limited leadership opportunities for women” (33). For Blain, the disaffection reflected “proto-feminist politics,” with an emphasis on “the value of women’s autonomous leadership” (31).

Gordon parted ways with Garvey in 1929, after concluding that “there was no hope of our going to Africa through the UNIA” (55). She briefly flirted with the pro-Japanese Pacific Movement of the Eastern World and its controversial representative, Ashima Takis, with whom she circulated an emigration petition in Chicago and Indiana. But then “their relationship began to unravel sometime in the fall of 1932,” for what Gordon described as “ideological differences”—including Takis’s reputed suggestion that Manchuria, a region of China then under Japanese occupation, should replace West Africa as the preferred destination for African American emigrants (55). Soon thereafter, Gordon established the PME to pursue Black emigration in earnest. While concentrated in the Midwest, Blain cites a 1942 FBI estimate of 4100 official PME members in chapters in Illinois, Washington, Indiana, Maryland, Arizona, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Sixty-five percent of the members were male.

Blain notes the convergences of the PME with Garvey’s UNIA, including the
resemblance between their mottos, while also emphasizing notable differences related to women’s leadership and autonomy. Interestingly, the latter could be more of degree than kind. For example, Blain contends that UNIA women often critiqued “black patriarchy while endorsing traditionally conservative views on gender and sexuality,” reflecting “the contradictory and paradoxical nature of UNIA women’s proto-feminist views and praxis” (36). These include embracing ideas about “the ‘natural’ roles of mother and wife,” while attempting “to subvert dominant views on gender” and vigorously fighting “to expand women’s leadership opportunities in the UNIA and in the community at large” (36–37). Such “paradoxes and contradictions” were no less evident in the PME. Blain notes that “though Gordon’s PME provided a platform for black nationalist women to serve in multiple leadership capacities, the organization still upheld certain traditional gender roles” (68). For example, the PME’s constitution stipulated “that while lay members, regardless of sex, could hold leadership positions, women could only hold the office of president when ‘there is not sufficiency among the males[.]’” (68). Yet although men formed a majority of PME members, Gordon evidently never found one sufficiently qualified to replace her as head of the organization.

With the US entry into World War II, Gordon’s previous pro-Japanese sympathies were viewed as seditious. Her efforts to dissuade PME members from serving in the US military in wartime led to her arrest and imprisonment. Other PME members, as well as non-PME Black nationalists who also expressed sympathy for Japan, suffered the same fate. Released from prison in 1945, after serving two years, Gordon returned to promoting Senator Langer’s repatriation bill, following Bilbo’s death. Ghana’s independence in 1957 suggested potentially new emigration sites, which Gordon considered, but was never able to pursue.

The rise of the Civil Rights movement, the splintering of emigrationist groups (often spawned from internecine rivalry in the UNIA and PME), and the emerging Black Power movement, exacerbated the decline of the PME. After Gordon’s death in 1961, PME and UNIA affiliated women continued to press Black nationalist territorial claims in the Civil Rights movement. Blain adjudges that the PME’s “Protective Corps,” which were modeled on the UNIA’s paramilitary African Legion, “foreshadowed” the Deacons for Defense and Justice, “an armed self-defense civil rights organization” (68–69); but in the same breath, she also asserts that “the PME did not publicly endorse self-defense” (69). Blain also finds continuities between the PME and the Black Panther Party—which is even more of a stretch, given the PME’s failure to publicly endorse self-defense, its pacifism, and its anti-communism. At the same time, Blain ignores more salient and obvious connections between the PME and the Black Power movement, such as Queen Mother Moore and Dara Abubakari’s (Virginia Collins), including Moore’s tutoring of the leadership of the Revolutionary Action Movement and hers and Abubakari’s leading role in the Republic of New Africa.

Blain’s work is at its best exploring and revealing the breadth of the PME’s rarely chronicled history, and the lives and leadership of the activist women who made so much of it. On my reading, the book is more...
problematic in its assessment of the nexus between Black feminism and Black nationalism. Blain does present historically complex scenarios that challenge the often- presumed incommensurability of Black nationalism and Black feminism, as in her recognition that Adelaide Casely Hayford “advocated black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and feminism” (28). More typically, though, Blain detaches Black women’s feminist agency from their Black nationalist ideology, which she does by adopting a conception in which Black nationalism and “Black internationalism” are often in opposition. She also assigns “proto-feminism”—or almost any aspect of progressive thought with respect to gender—to an amorphous “internationalism,” rather than to the progressive Black nationalism in which it is actually situated. This allows Blain to claim that “[p]erhaps the most important aspect of black nationalist women’s political life was their interest in and commitment to black internationalism” [emphasis added] (8). She avers that “a black internationalist vision”—presumably in contrast to a Black nationalist one—“links the experiences of people of African descent with other nonwhite groups,” and seeks “collaborations and alliances among people of color in their struggles against global white supremacy” (48).

It is, however, ahistorical to separate international/transnational elements and orientations from definitions of Black nationalism. Black nationalism—is ipso facto internationalist, and always has been. As Wilson Moses, whom Blain cites approvingly, has noted, as an ideology Black nationalism emerged from a pan-Africanist fusion of the diverse African cultures of enslaved Black Americans as early as the eighteenth century. As such, Black nationalism historically has focused on Africa, other parts of North America, and the Caribbean as well as the US, as exemplified by Paul Cuffee’s pursuit of a settlement in Africa and on the frontiers of the US in order to both industrialize Africa and undermine US slavery. Blain does cite Cuffee’s emigrationism, but does not explore its implications for her constricted conception of Black nationalism. Yet such “internationalist” initiatives pre-dated the UNIA and PME by more than a century, to the extent of rendering redundant the term “internationalism” when appended to Black nationalism. In effect, to excise “internationalism” from Black nationalism is to lift Black nationalism out of its own history.

All told, Blain makes an important contribution to the literature in providing the only book-length treatment of the PME and the women who led it. Her book reminds us that distilling from history the often diverse and contradictory voices and practices in the Black liberation struggle applies not only to individuals, but also to the ideologies they embrace. Blain’s chronicling of Black nationalist women in the PME makes an important contribution to the former, and an incomplete one to the latter.

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