

Keisha N. Blain. *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2018. Pp. 255. Hardcover. \$34.95.

Keisha N. Blain, Associate Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh, connects feminist methodology to the role of activism in *Set the World on Fire* by examining female black nationalists engaged in U.S. and global politics from the Great Depression through the early years of the Cold War. In doing so, Blain challenges other historians who might classify the “golden age of black nationalism” as declining when Marcus Garvey was no longer at the helm of the United Negro Improvement Association. Utilizing an interdisciplinary lens of women’s studies and social history, Blain’s bottom-up approach provides the reader with a consistent reminder of her thesis: female black nationalists were at the center of a movement pushing for social, political and racial equality during the post-Garvey era.

Set the World on Fire traces the stories of multiple female activists, smoothly weaving in their background, passions and sacrifices. Blain’s major strength is making each woman’s story personal and meaningful, allowing the reader to clearly understand why and how they contributed to black nationalism at home and abroad. Chapters build sequentially to highlight the intersectionality facing black women who advocated both women’s rights, and racial equality. They promoted black political self-determination, economic self-sufficiency and the possibility of repatriation to West Africa with funding from the U.S. government.

Blain utilizes a wide array of sources, ranging from personal letters and government records, to photographs, speeches and poetry by many activists of the era. She includes expansive citations with recommendations for further reading. Rather than place the main focus of her book on the outcomes and success of these activists, Blain emphasizes the process and fusion of local and transnational organizing strategies employed. Her work is accessible because she explains the terms she uses. For example, Blain frequently refers to the term “proto-feminism,” which she defines as before the feminist era of the 1960s-1970s in the U.S.

and provides readers with an enhanced understanding of where black feminism fits on the political spectrum of history.

While emphasizing women who challenged a consistent gender bias in the activist network, she also highlights the paradox that some black nationalist women instigated by advocating both progressive women's rights and supporting a patriarchal vision of black liberation that would place men in positions of power and control. Including these details makes her book fascinating because it symbolizes the struggles of gender politics and contradictions that can be evaluated for their impact and legacy in the present.

Set the World on Fire also initiates thought-provoking analysis of black feminism through the lens of unlikely alliances. Some women established and maintained communication with two white supremacists that supported federal legislation to fund black remigration out of the U.S. As radical as this example was, Blain confidently proposes that it serves as proof of the dedication and willingness by female activists to accomplish their goals. Although the Greater Liberia Bill was not approved and repatriation did not fully occur, Blain fills any gaps of doubt about the legacy of black feminists. She excels in not only identifying women "on the margins" of black nationalist thought, she outlines how their organizing efforts eventually connected to future generations of activists, shaping black identity into the present era.

Blain's interdisciplinary approach makes *Set the World on Fire* appropriate for a wide readership, ranging from African American history, Women's and Gender history as well as Transnational Studies. Female black nationalists are presented as prominent leaders within the fight for equality during the early twentieth century. Their tactics were often ambitious, complicated and even questionable. However, their ideas were centered on improving the conditions and opportunities of black men and women throughout the diaspora. Despite multiple setbacks, the foundation for future generations of activists was created. *Set the World on Fire* ensures the stories of these women and their legacy remains relevant.

Alexia Bravo