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Keisha N. Blain  
*University of Iowa*

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# Black Politics and Global Struggles for Racial Justice

SEPTEMBER 18, 2015 BY KEISHA N. BLAIN



Silent Protest parade on Fifth Avenue, NYC, July 28, 1917, in response to East St. Louis race riot. *(Photo: NYPL Digital Collections)*

**I**n February 2015, the body of Lulile, a young man of Haitian descent, was **found hanging from a tree in a public square in the Dominican Republic**. Amidst an international public outcry about the DR's treatment of citizens of Haitian descent, Lulile's lifeless body, hanging in the same public square where he once shined shoes, signified the **horror that continues to unfold in the DR**. It has been months since Lulile's body was found in the market square in Santiago and media outlets have been largely silent on his death or the investigation DR officials promised to

initiate. Also silent are some black activists and political leaders in the U.S., who tend to be far less vocal about racial injustices taking place outside of U.S. borders.

Black activists and political leaders in the U.S. have not always been this quiet about racial injustices taking place outside of the country. Historically, black men and women in the United States frequently linked national concerns to global ones. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, for example, black activists in the United States rallied in support of the African state, and activists often engaged in global efforts to end white supremacy on the African continent more broadly by forming social welfare organizations and lobbying the State Department. Their concerns also stretched far beyond Africa and its diaspora. In his 1937 speech, “The Meaning of Japan,” civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized the cultural and political exchanges and historical connections between African Americans and the Japanese. He reminded people of African descent in the United States that the challenges they faced on the national front were deeply intertwined with the struggles for freedom among people of color worldwide.



W.E.B. DU BOIS.

*(Photo: NYPL Digital Collections)*

Reminiscent of his earlier statements in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois brought attention to the global color line, the racial hierarchy which placed people

of color at the bottom and whites on the top. Reflecting his commitment to global racial solidarity, he emphasized what he described in his 1937 speech as a “certain bond between the colored peoples because of world-wide prejudice.” Du Bois personified this internationalist vision but it was a fundamental aspect of the black activist tradition throughout the twentieth century. Recognizing that the condition of black men and women in the United States was “but a local phase of a world problem,” American black activists articulated global visions of freedom and employed a range of strategies and tactics intent on shaping foreign policies and influencing world events.

During the early twentieth century, Du Bois, [Madame C.J. Walker](#), [Mary Church Terrell](#), [James Weldon Johnson](#), [Mittie Maude Lena Gordon](#), and several other black activists called on African Americans to identify their interests with other people of color across the globe. In the early 1940s, Gordon – the founder of the Chicago-based Peace Movement of Ethiopia – launched a massive letter-writing campaign in an effort to forge alliances with activists in various parts of the globe. Significantly, Gordon appealed to her followers not to lose sight of the global dimensions of the black freedom struggle. Writing to a political ally in 1942, Gordon reflected on the challenges that Indians endured under British colonialism and staunchly declared, “When India is free all colonial people and subjects throughout the world will be free.” In another letter to a fellow black activist in Arkansas, Gordon emphasized the link between the challenges facing African descended people in the United States and the plight of Indians. “The India situation is somewhat connected,” she argued, “and the complete freedom of India will bring complete freedom to the American black people, because the same men are holding them in slavery.” While the caste system in British India was not entirely the same as the racial hierarchy in the United States, and the racial demographics of the two countries were vastly different, Gordon believed that the struggle against white supremacy in the United States could not be divorced from the larger struggle against white imperialism worldwide.

Expressing similar sentiments during the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., Edith Sampson, Paul Robeson, Eslanda Robeson, Malcolm X and other black activists linked the fight for civil rights in the United States with the struggle for African decolonization and other anti-imperialist movements abroad. Throughout the Civil Rights-Black Power era, a number of organizations in the United States including the Council of African Affairs (CAA) and the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) promoted the idea that African Americans should identify with colonized peoples all over the globe. As Paul Robeson explained, on behalf of CAA, “Our fight for Negro rights here [in the United States] is linked inseparably with the liberation movements of the people of the Caribbean and Africa and the colonial world in general.”

In recent years, we have witnessed a resurgence of black political activism in response to an unprecedented wave of police brutality across the nation. While [some efforts have been made](#) to address racialized violence occurring in other parts of the globe, much of the focus remains within the borders of the United States. The deafening silence among some black activists and political leaders concerning [modern-day acts of lynching in the Dominican Republic](#) and other acts of racial injustices abroad underscore this point. The recent Charleston shooting by a white supremacist who posed with the Confederate flag [and the Rhodesian and apartheid-era South African flags](#) serves as a reminder that national concerns are never far removed from global ones.

## About the Author

Keisha N. Blain is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Iowa. Her research and teaching interests include black internationalism, radical politics, and global feminisms. She is currently completing her first book, which examines how black nationalist women engaged in national and global politics from the early twentieth century to the 1950s.



She completed a B.A. in History and Africana Studies from Binghamton University (SUNY) and a Ph.D. in History from Princeton University.