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## Racial Violence and Black Nationalist Politics

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# Guest Post: Racial Violence and Black Nationalist Politics

August 18, 2015

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Someone recently asked me why the black women activists I study were so determined to leave the United States. It was a question I had been asked many times before. As I often do, I explained the complex history of black emigration, highlighting how these women's ideas were reflective of a long tradition of black nationalist and internationalist thought. I acknowledged the romantic utopian nature of these women's ideas. However, I also addressed the socioeconomic challenges that many of these women endured and explained how the prospect of life in West Africa appeared to be far more appealing—especially during the tumultuous years of the Great Depression and World War II. I spoke about black women's ties to Africa and the feelings of displacement many of them felt as they longed for a place to truly call home. It was the same feeling of displacement to which the poet Countee Cullen alluded when he asked a simple yet profound question: "What is Africa to me?"



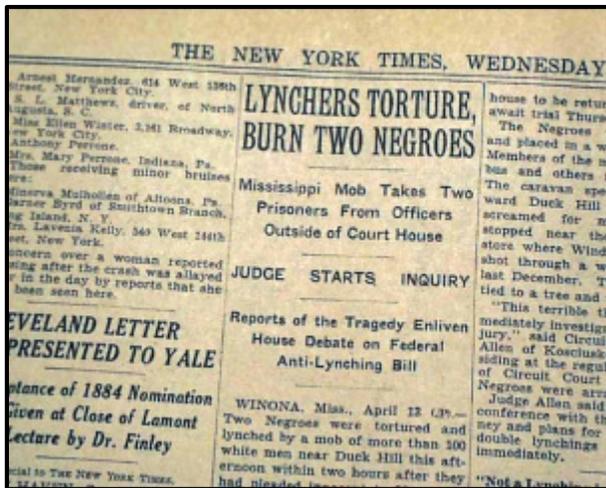
Members of the UNIA in Harlem, 1920s.  
Image: Black Business Network

At a moment when black people in the United States were being denied the full benefits of citizenship, black nationalist women—including those who were active members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME)—advocated black emigration to West Africa as a legitimate response to racial discrimination and white supremacy. As the works of historians Amy Louise Wood, Crystal Feimster, Kidada Williams, and others have demonstrated, black men and women

were routinely subjected to varying forms of racial violence—including lynching, rape, assault and murder—for centuries. Many of the women featured in my work had Southern roots and knew firsthand the terror of white mob violence. For instance, black nationalist leader and Louisiana native Mittie Maude Lena Gordon recalled witnessing the lynching of a black man in 1898, two years after the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. This horrific incident left a lasting psychological and emotional scar on Gordon. “Since that day,” she insisted, “I have been the most unhappy person that ever lived [sic].” [1]

During the 1920s, Gordon was active in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and went on to become the founder of the Chicago-based Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), the largest black nationalist organization established by a woman in the United States. At its peak, the PME attracted an estimated 300,000 supporters in various parts of Chicago and across the United States. In the late 1930s, Gordon sent PME recruiters to Mississippi and other parts of the Jim Crow South to convince black men and women to abandon life in the United States for the prospect of a better one in Liberia. While Northern and Western cities appeared to be attractive refuges for black men and women, Gordon and members of the PME could not envision remaining in the United States—especially not when white mob violence was so prevalent. As one of Gordon’s supporters expressed in a poem, “There is fruit in Africa worthwhile eating/ We don’t have to stay here and take a white man’s beating.” [2]

It is no coincidence that PME leaders began organizing black sharecroppers in Mississippi during the late 1930s. Between 1889 and 1945, there were 467 recorded lynchings in the state—representing thirteen percent of the nation’s recorded lynchings. An estimated 12.7 percent of those who were lynched in the state—from the period of 1889 to 1935—were accused of rape. [3] Although white vigilantes generally targeted black men, women were also victims of white mob violence. Between 1880 and 1930, at least one hundred and thirty black women were lynched in the Southern region. [4] In Mississippi, roughly eighteen black women were victims of mob violence during this period. [5]



Newspaper Article about the Duck Hill Lynching

PME activists began organizing black sharecroppers only miles away from Duck Hill, Mississippi—the site of one of the most infamous lynchings of the twentieth century. In April 1937, a mob of white men seized Roosevelt Townes and Robert McDaniels, two African Americans who had been accused of murdering a local white merchant. After mob leaders hung Townes and McDaniels to a tree, hundreds of local whites watched on as they used gasoline blowtorches to burn the men alive. The

Duck Hill lynching might have gone unnoticed, as many other acts of racial violence in Mississippi during this period, were it not for a spectator’s photographs. Images of the gruesome scene later circulated across the nation as Congress debated the passage of a federal anti-lynching bill. Despite public outcries, no one was ever arrested for the murders.[6]

These kinds of occurrences strengthened black nationalist women’s resolve to leave the United States. In a 1941 editorial, published in the *New Negro World*, UNIA activist Edith Allen offered a scathing critique of American democracy in the wake of yet another lynching in the South. She wrote, “[I]n America the land where Democracy is supposed to be in evidence...a human being was shackled to a tree in the public square in the state of Georgia...” “Even the beast[s] are not mistreated,” Allen added, “and yet such action is unchallenged and such perpetrators go unpunished.” Without mincing words, Allen went on to endorse black emigration and political self-determination, insisting that racial acts of violence would cease to occur if black people “had a country of [their] own.”[7]

Like Allen, many black men and women during this period endorsed emigration to West Africa in response to race prejudice and white violence in the United States. As historians Charles Spurgeon Johnson, Kenneth Barnes, Ibrahim Sundiata, and others have documented, those who managed to relocate to various parts of West Africa, particularly Liberia, encountered a host of challenges (many similar to the ones they left behind). Yet, the vision of establishing a new home in Liberia, offered them a glimmer of hope during a difficult period of U.S. history. Certainly, there are many reasons why black men and

women desired to leave the United States. However, for activist women such as Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and Edith Allen, escaping the seemingly unending terror of racial violence was reason enough.

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1 See Keisha N. Blain, “‘Confraternity Among All Dark Races’: Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and the Practice of Black (Inter)nationalism in Chicago, 1932-1942,” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* (forthcoming; Spring 2016).

2 Peace Movement of Ethiopia, *One God, One Country, One People; also, a Brief History, Memorial to President, Funeral Oration and Burial Ceremonies, Battle Hymn of the Peace Movement* (United States: s.n., 1941), 34.

3 Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 229, 335.

4 Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 158-85.

5 Kerry Segrave, *Lynchings of Women in the United States: The Recorded Cases, 1851-1946* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co. Publishers, 2010), 8.

6 Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 197.

7 Edith Allen, “Ga. Prisoner Chained to Tree,” *New Negro World*, October 1941 (emphasis in original text).