



The World Trump Made

Civil Rights International

The Fight Against Racism Has Always Been Global

By Keisha N. Blain

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A protest in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in Seoul, South Korea, June 2020

SIPA USA / AP



On June 13, 2020, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists gathered in London's Trafalgar Square to call for the eradication of racism and white supremacy. With their fists raised high,

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which they wore to help stop the spread of COVID-19, the scene could have been taken straight from the 1960s. In that earlier era, activists around the world connected their own struggles to those of African Americans who challenged segregation, disenfranchisement, poverty, and police brutality—just as their successors do today. Meanwhile, Black American activists agitated for human rights and called attention to the devaluation of Black lives not only in the United States but all over the world, including in places under colonial rule.

Many tend to think of that era's push for civil rights and Black power as a distinctly American phenomenon. It was, in fact, a global movement—and so is BLM today. By linking national concerns to global ones, BLM activists are building on [a long history of Black internationalism](#). Indeed, Black Americans have always connected their struggle for rights to fights for freedom in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere.

Although surges of Black internationalism have often been led from the top—through the efforts of politicians and diplomats—some of the most dynamic and enduring movements have developed at the grassroots, [often led by Black women](#) and involving working-class and impoverished Black people. During the twentieth century, Black internationalists organized on the local level, frequently in urban centers, to give voice to the concerns of ordinary people. Utilizing diverse strategies and tactics, they articulated global visions of freedom by working collaboratively and in solidarity with Black people and other people of color across the world. BLM activists have carried on this tradition, often using social media as a vehicle to forge transnational alliances.

Although much has changed since the 1960s, racism continues to shape every aspect of Black life in the United States. The troubling pattern of police killings of unarmed Black Americans sparked the current uprisings, but it represents only part of the problem; such killings, horrific though they may be, are merely symptoms of the deeper diseases of anti-Black racism and white supremacy. As BLM activists have emphasized, these problems are not contained within the borders of the United States: they are global scourges, and addressing them requires a global effort.

BLM was launched in 2013 by [the activists](#) Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi after the acquittal on murder charges of the man who killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy, in Florida the previous year. Following the 2014 police shooting of another Black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, BLM evolved into a nationwide and global protest movement. In a matter of months, activists had established BLM chapters in several major cities outside the United States. In Toronto, for example, Janaya Khan and Yusra Ali co-founded a chapter in October 2014 following the police killing of [Jermaine Carby](#), a 33-year-old Black man, in nearby Brampton, Ontario. A few months later, a diverse group of activists in Japan launched an Afro-Asian solidarity march called [“Tokyo for Ferguson”](#) in the wake of a grand jury’s acquittal of the police officer who gunned down Brown. Displaying signs in both English and Japanese, hundreds of protesters marched through the streets of Tokyo. In the months that followed, BLM demonstrations swept cities across Europe, including Amsterdam, Berlin, London, and Paris.

In 2016, Tometi [delivered a speech](#) before the UN General Assembly and issued a statement emphasizing an “urgent need to engage the international community about the most pressing human rights crises of our day” and pointing out that by internationalizing the movement, BLM was following “in the footsteps of many courageous civil and human rights defenders that came before.” Over the past several years, BLM activists in the United States have indeed forged meaningful alliances with activists and human rights campaigners elsewhere. The movement’s internationalization was made visible with the massive demonstrations that erupted in the wake of the police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and other Black Americans earlier this year.

In establishing such links, BLM is very much following in the footsteps of previous movements against racism. In the early twentieth century, civil rights activists often called on African Americans to see their interests as tied to those of people of color elsewhere. In January 1919, for example, the Black journalist John Quincy Adams published an open letter to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in [The Appeal](#), an influential Black-owned newspaper, demanding that the United States seek to protect the rights and recognition of people of color everywhere. “Through the centuries,” Adams noted, “the colored races of the globe have

Black Lives Matter follows in the footsteps of previous movements against racism.

At around the same time, Madam C. J. Walker, a business pioneer who rose to fame after making a fortune marketing beauty and hair products for Black people, established the International League of Darker Peoples with several other well-known Black activists, including the Jamaican Black nationalist Marcus Garvey, the labor organizer A. Philip Randolph, and the Harlem clergyman Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. During World War I, the ILDP provided a platform for Walker and her associates to advocate for the rights and dignity of marginalized groups across the world and to tap into surging anti-imperialist and anticolonial fervor. In January 1919, Walker coordinated a historic meeting in New York City between a delegation from the ILDP and S. Kuriowa, the publisher of the Tokyo newspaper *Yorudo Chobo*. At the meeting, members of the ILDP asked Kuriowa to encourage Japanese officials to advocate racial equality at the Paris Peace Conference, which was scheduled to take place several days later. They received a favorable response from Kuriowa, who assured them: “The race question will be raised at the peace table.” Western officials ultimately sidelined the issue of racial prejudice at the conference. But Walker’s actions laid the groundwork for a new generation of Black activists and intellectuals who sought international support in the decades that followed.

The 1930s saw the rise of a number of grassroots political organizations through which African Americans built alliances with activists of color from other countries in the global struggle against white supremacy. During the early 1930s, Pearl Sherrod, a leader of an organization called the Development of Our Own, became an early proponent of solidarity among poor nations, identifying the common interests between Black Americans and nonwhites in colonies across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. In a 1934 editorial in the *Detroit Tribune Independent*, she reminded readers that “the greater part of the colored world is today under white political control,” even though the majority of the world’s inhabitants were nonwhite. Echoing Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others, Sherrod called on people of African descent in the United States to forge transracial political alliances. “Then, and only then will we get power.” she wrote.

Sherrod's internationalist vision mirrored those of other Black intellectuals and activists, including members of the [Peace Movement of Ethiopia](#), the largest Black nationalist organization established by a woman in the United States. Founded by Mittie Maude Lena Gordon in Chicago in December 1932, the PME advocated universal Black liberation, economic self-sufficiency, racial pride, and Black unity and attracted around 300,000 supporters during the 1930s and 1940s. Deeply attuned to developments elsewhere, Gordon sought out alliances with activists from abroad. In December 1940, for example, after reading in the *Richmond Times* about Akweke Abyssinia Nwafor Orizu, a Black nationalist from eastern Nigeria, she invited him to speak before an audience of PME supporters in Chicago. For ten days in March 1941, Orizu held a series of public meetings with Gordon and her supporters, addressing African nationalism and the emigration of Black Americans to Africa.

Like Sherrod, Gordon saw a direct link between manifestations of white supremacy in the United States and those in Asia, arguing in 1942 that the “destruction of the white man in Asia is the destruction of the white man in the United States.” In particular, she emphasized the connection between the challenges facing Black Americans and the plight of Indians under British colonial rule. “The complete freedom of India will bring complete freedom to the American black people,” she wrote, “because the same men are holding them in slavery.”

FREEDOM IN THE MOTHERLAND

The Black internationalist movements and organizations that formed in the first half of the twentieth century laid the intellectual groundwork for the civil rights and Black Power movements of the second half. Many of the African American leaders who emerged during the 1950s and 1960s adopted an internationalist vision. For some of them, Ghana—one of the first African countries to gain independence from European colonial rule—held particular significance. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife, Coretta Scott King, worked across national borders and forged solidarity with people of color across the globe. The Kings joined a cadre of Black activists and artists—including Randolph, the actress and vocalist

Ghana in 1957, just after the country won its independence from the United Kingdom. At the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's new prime minister, these African American activists participated in several events in the capital, Accra. During an interview he gave while in Ghana, King credited the visit with renewing his conviction in "the ultimate triumph of justice." Ghana's liberation, he said, had given him "new hope in the struggle for freedom."

The following year, the anticolonial activist Eslanda Goode Robeson, the wife of the singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson, joined Nkrumah, the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba, the U.S. labor organizer Maida Springer, and many other notable figures at the All African People's Conference in Accra. At the conference, attendees advocated the immediate end of colonialism in Africa and emphasized the significance of pan-African unity. In subsequent years, several well-known Black American activists and intellectuals, including Du Bois, Maya Angelou, and Julian Mayfield, relocated to Ghana, drawn to the country by Nkrumah's pan-Africanist vision and excited by the challenge of nation building in a postcolonial state. "I never dreamed to see this miracle," Du Bois later explained. "I am startled before it."

During this period, activists skillfully leveraged their transnational alliances and global audience to bring international pressure on the United States to confront racism and discrimination. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, U.S. leaders wanted their country to be seen as a champion of equal rights and democracy and as a beacon of freedom. But efforts to draw a stark contrast between U.S. democracy and Soviet communism were undermined by the mistreatment of Black Americans. Black leaders took advantage of this tension to advance the struggle for civil and human rights.

Less well-known and more radical African American activists also drew inspiration from overseas and built international networks. From 1957 to 1963, the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, a grassroots organization led by the radical Black activist Audley "Queen Mother" Moore, brought together Black women in Louisiana to seek reparations, welfare rights, and legal aid for Black men in the United States who had been wrongly accused of

home and abroad,” and the UA EW actively forged transnational relationships, including with the Kenyan labor leader and pan-Africanist Tom Mboya.

A demonstrator in Brasília, Brazil, June 2020

Adriano Machado / Reuters

Moore mentored a number of Black Power activists, including Malcolm X. Her dreams of global Black liberation influenced the internationalist ideas that defined his later years. In 1964, Malcolm X toured West Africa for six months, during which time he made a pilgrimage to Mecca. When he returned to the United States, he established the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which became a significant vehicle for Black internationalist organizing in the 1960s. During his first public address on behalf of the new organization, Malcolm X—who had adopted the name el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz following his trip to Mecca—explained that the new group would seek to organize “everyone in the Western Hemisphere of African descent into one united force” and, eventually, to “unite with our brothers on the motherland, on the continent of Africa.”

Malcolm's work inspired the activists in the Black Panther Party, originally established in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to challenge police brutality against African Americans—much like today's BLM movement. And, like BLM, the BPP's work in the United States sparked a global movement to confront anti-Black racism. By the late 1960s, BPP chapters could be found in several cities across the globe, including Algiers and London. BPP leaders also maintained strong transnational alliances with activists in diverse places, such as Cuba, India, Israel, and New Zealand.

From the late 1960s to the early 1990s, African Americans were actively engaged in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. Several organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Council of Negro Women, supported the antiapartheid movement through picketing, lobbying, fundraising, and other activities. Prominent African American celebrities, such as Harry Belafonte, Arthur Ashe, and Stevie Wonder, also lent their support, using their platforms to bring international attention to the issue.

The collaboration between African American and South African activists highlighted the power and significance of Black internationalism as a political strategy. Activists in both countries endured some of the same challenges, including anticomunist smear campaigns waged by officials intent on suppressing Black resistance. Yet these transnational exchanges played a vital role in shaping the foreign policies of both nations. The political gains and successes, no matter how small, helped invigorate organizers, who drew inspiration from one another as they worked to dismantle racism and white supremacy. By linking local and national concerns with global ones, activists during this period set a precedent for future generations of Black internationalists, including members of BLM.

BLACK LIVES MATTER—EVERYWHERE

In a recent interview, Cullors, one of the co-founders of BLM, described the current uprisings as “a watershed moment” in U.S. and global history. “The entire world is saying,

Tometi. “We see these rallies in solidarity emerging all across the globe, and I have friends texting me with their images in France and the Netherlands and Costa Rica, and people are showing me that they are showing up in solidarity.”

BLM has become a vital force in the long history of Black internationalism. The movement now offers a significant platform for Black activists in the United States to forge and deepen transnational links with activists across the globe. Today, BLM has a global network of dozens of chapters. This number will likely grow exponentially in the coming years.

The protests in the United States, in their strength, reach, and sheer magnitude, are unlike any the country has ever witnessed before. The COVID-19 pandemic—which has exacerbated already difficult conditions for Black people in the United States and abroad—has provoked a sense of urgency among protesters. As recent data have revealed, COVID-19 infection rates in Black communities are significantly higher than in predominately white communities. Owing to disparities in income, wealth, and access to health care, among other factors, Black people in the United States are dying from COVID-19 at a rate that far exceeds those for other racial groups, laying bare how racism shapes every aspect of Black life.

As the 2020 U.S. presidential election looms, the uprising that began this past spring in the United States is likely to fuel new rallies and protests, which will probably expand across the globe, extending to new places and inspiring activists of all races and social backgrounds. Efforts to quell these movements will also intensify—including efforts that involve surveillance by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. However, the urgency of the moment and the demands to dismantle anti-Black racism and white supremacy and the violence they yield will keep activists in the streets. Those in the United States can take heart knowing that people all over the world see their own struggles for rights and dignity reflected in the BLM movement.

CORRECTION APPENDED (August 20, 2020)

An earlier version of this article misidentified the city where the Black Panther Party was