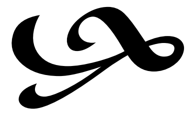
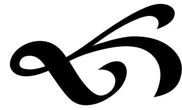


Voices



Keith Lewis

Keith Lewis
Photo by Langston Maynor.

I was born in Muskegon, Michigan, a small, working-class town. Muskegon Heights, where most of my extended family lived, was almost entirely African American. North Muskegon was almost entirely white. But I went to racially mixed schools, and I played drums and saxophone in the band. So I ended up having experiences that some members of my family had not had.

Growing up, I wasn't especially conscious of Africa. But I knew first-hand about the harsh realities of poverty and the class divide. My mother was a single mother and she worked in a factory, making auto parts. It was the era of Reaganomics, and she struggled to provide the bare essentials for my sister and me. At this point in my life I wasn't yet "political." I didn't think about how our situation related to the wider world, to the long history of racial oppression and resistance.

That began to change during my junior year at Michigan State University. I met other black students—African Americans, a brother from Jamaica—who had Pan-Africanist and black nationalist views. I didn't yet embrace all of it, but they got me thinking. I began to see that years of miseducation and lack of knowledge of our history had contributed to my own lack of self-knowledge. Studying the teachings of Naim Akbar, Marcus Garvey, and Assata Shakur, I began to see the connections between struggles in black America and struggles in Africa. I got involved with the Black Student Alliance and went to Black Power rallies on campus.

After graduating in 1996, I moved to Chicago. I'd been in the business school at Michigan State, being groomed for the corporate route. But by this time I had decided that wasn't for me. I worked first with a program called Public Allies, which trained young adults as community leaders. This was another new experience, because I met young activists from many different backgrounds who were fighting for social change.

At Michigan State, a mainly white institution, there were many non-black students, but I hadn't necessarily interacted much with them. It was when I went to Public Allies that I had a chance to dialogue with folks from all different walks of life, talking about race, class, gender, sexual orientation. That expanded my world view. I learned about the issues that other people, beyond my own black community, were facing. Connecting with them, I joined a social justice struggle that cut across racial, geographic, and gender lines.

Now, in 2007, I'm an educator, an activist, and a father. I work as a counselor at Little Village Lawndale High School in Chicago, helping create a multicultural learning environment. The students at the school are about 70 percent Latino, mostly of Mexican origin, and about 30 percent African American. They come from racially homogeneous neighborhoods and elementary schools, so it's a challenge for them to come together.

I'm part of a group called Solidarity not Charity, which is contributing to the rebuilding of New Orleans after Katrina. We facilitate dialogue among young people of color from Chicago, New Orleans, and the Bronx. African American and Latino youth come together to discuss their common problems of displacement, criminalization, and lack of education, and to understand each other's histories and struggles.

For me and for many other black Americans, there's so much about our own past that we just don't know. We have a lot of history that's been stolen, history that we never were taught. I've been fortunate—I've had people who've challenged me to look beyond the surface, to seek out more about our connections to Africa and Africans in the diaspora. I've studied ancient Egypt, learned about the struggles in South Africa, about what happened in Liberia, the genocide in Rwanda.

I visited Senegal and Gambia for a month in 2004. There was no particular mission—I went to observe, learn, and make connections. And I had some rich dialogue with folks there about relationships between African Americans and Africans on the continent, about our perceptions of each other and where those perceptions come from. I'm planning a trip to Ghana soon.

So many people in this country, including black Americans, have an image of Africa as a distant, alien continent, a place of famine, disease, and despair. Those issues exist, of course, but having gone to Africa, I know that many other things are happening there too. I saw that as black Americans, we can contribute to the development of Africa from an economic and social standpoint. But I also realized that historically, culturally, socially, there's much that we don't know. There are many opportunities for us to learn and connect.

In my work with youth, I try to dispel some of the untruths. About famine in Africa—a land rich in resources—I ask: Why does it exist? Where does it come from? Those are the kinds of questions I raise.

When I think about the issues facing black communities in the U.S. and abroad, I realize that "there's nothing new underneath the sun." We have to connect with the history of struggles that have preceded our own. Though apartheid has been dismantled in South Africa, it provides a historical context of racial segregation and struggle. Racial and class isolation exist within many American communities today, leading to disunity and hatred. If the lessons of the past go unlearned, history will continue to repeat itself right before our eyes.

Erin Polley

Erin Polley
Photo by Mario Quezada.

In the spring of 2003 I'd been living in Chicago two years, working as a cocktail waitress. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life next. Then President Bush invaded Iraq. As the bombs fell over Baghdad, I went downtown to join the march against the war and was arrested along with several hundred others. In jail I met all these amazing people, and we went to court together and stayed in touch. I found myself a part of a community that was actively working for change around the world. Soon I found a job doing antiwar work at the American Friends Service Committee office in Chicago. So, you might say I fell into activism.

That fall I enrolled at Columbia College Chicago, where Prexy Nesbitt and Lisa Brock were teaching. I had gotten to know Prexy through AFSC, and he encouraged me to take his African history course. I worked with Lisa in an independent study on Cuba, but it turned into an independent study on the world.

Both of them encouraged my interest in Africa, and they gave me opportunities to become part of their work. Over long lunches and tireless meetings at school, they taught me to use history as a way to understand racism, colonialism, and culture today. I learned about Ella Baker and Helen Joseph. And I learned about Prexy's and Lisa's own lives as activists. Their commitment to the anti-apartheid movement and to teaching people about Africa inspired a new kind of activism in me, a 22-year-old white girl from the Midwest.

I became more aware of the racism happening around me every day. I grew up in Indianapolis, but my family was originally from rural Indiana and Oklahoma. They were pretty apolitical, involved in the Southern Baptist Church. Growing up, I wasn't particularly conscious of racism. And I think that's one of the big things Prexy taught me. We were talking about our families one day, and I commented that I really didn't see much racism when I was growing up. He asked me pointed questions about the diversity of people who lived on my street, the diversity of people who were in my classrooms. I started to realize that even though there were not overtly racist things being said at my dinner table, I was experiencing a different kind of racism, in a white, exclusive, suburban world.

By my second year at Columbia, I was filling my schedule with classes on African art, literature, and history. Most of my free time was spent hunting for South African music, watching films about Africa, and reading the histories of people like Nelson Mandela and Albie Sachs. I became fascinated by postcolonial Africa and the liberation struggles.

In August 2006 I joined a group that visited South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. I met activists in all four countries. Even though I'd done a lot of preparation for the trip, my experiences com-

pletely changed my view of Africa. I met young Zimbabwean men my age who'd been banned from studying at the public university after they protested tuition hikes. I met descendants of the Herero in Namibia who have been struggling for the world to recognize the genocide their people suffered under German occupation. I visited the Hatcliffe informal settlement in Harare, where 6,000 people settled after their homes were bulldozed by the government. In each new place, we started an incredible cross-continental dialogue.

I'm now working full-time at AFSC as an antiwar activist and attending Columbia College with a full-time load. I don't sleep much! I hope to finish my degree next year, with a major in cultural studies and a minor in black world studies. I don't know yet what I want to do. I'm thinking about graduate school, but I also plan to continue my work as an activist. I do know that Africa has changed who I am and how I view the world. My interest is in being an ally of people who are working for change in their countries, rather than being somebody who is there to save them.

Dara Cooper

Dara Cooper
Photo courtesy of Dara Cooper.

Who am I? We grow our entire lives trying to answer that question! What I know so far: I am an activist, organizer, student, educator, writer, and passionate priestess of Shango, the Yoruba deity guiding social justice, among many other things.

Activism is my life. I worked with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and the Pan African Treatment Access Movement (PATAM) in Johannesburg, South Africa, while I was completing my graduate studies in community development. In 2006 I became the national organizer for a campaign to defend political exile Assata Shakur, who's now in Cuba, against unjust charges of terrorism.

The spirit of activism comes from my mother, a beautiful black nationalist and Yoruba priestess. It also comes from my grandmother, a savvy teacher and union organizer who was once the target of McCarthyism. From both of them I learned the lesson that every injustice can be fought, and the people can win.

My introduction to liberation movements was through the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s. I remember going to rallies as a child and hearing about the parallels between Jim Crow and apartheid. I remember boycotting international corporations—I still refuse to use Shell gas or purchase Liz Claiborne to this day. I remember meetings with Africans born on the continent, African descendants, and supporters, all working in solidarity. The movement wasn't based on pity or charity but on justice. We understand that our individual freedom only lies within our collective liberation.

As an undergraduate at Ohio State University, I was an organizer with the African Student Union. I was a spokesperson for a successful eight-day sit-in protesting racist administrative policies and demanding support for OSU's Black Cultural Center and Office of Minority Affairs. I also worked to support the Communication Workers of America's campaign to secure living wages and improve health benefits for custodial and health care workers at OSU. Later I worked with groups in Chicago, especially Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. I attended the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004 as one of their representatives.

My work in South Africa with the Treatment Action Campaign involved research and reporting on HIV treatment rollouts across the continent and assessing their treatment literacy program. TAC has successfully combined research, advocacy, and organization of HIV-positive people to take action for themselves. It has protested against big pharmaceutical companies and taken on the South African government itself, demanding that antiretroviral and other treatments be available to all who need them. With PATAM, a continent-wide coalition in which TAC is a leading participant, I helped with research and with coordinating an eight-day training on HIV virology and treatment.

During my time at TAC I was fortunate to participate in a TAC-sponsored protest. After the long and successful battle to have the South African government commit itself to an HIV treatment rollout plan, TAC focused on monitoring the government's progress. But the government was withholding information, so TAC filed another lawsuit against the government for denying information to the public.

The morning of the case, TAC led a rally down the street from the courtroom and held a press conference. Members spoke about living with HIV and their struggles to access treatment and information. They danced and sang their legendary South African *toyi-toyi*. I could never capture in words the camaraderie I felt in the midst of this demonstration. TAC eventually won the suit and the government was ordered to pay a settlement and commit to making information more accessible and transparent. It would be difficult to imagine such a victory for a community organization here in the U.S.

After returning to the United States, I worked with an aid agency to improve laboratory testing and monitoring of HIV/AIDS in Southern and Eastern Africa. Visiting and working in Ethiopia, I learned that it isn't enough to try to help; you also have to confront the paternalistic structures that often undermine the goals of helping communities.

In my current job I focus on one particular instance of injustice, the injustice against Assata Shakur. She was shot by police on the New Jersey turnpike in 1973 and convicted of murder despite evidence that she had never fired a gun and was wounded while holding her hands above her head. The U.S. government has offered a million dollars for her capture. In working on Assata's case, I also try to educate people about the broader, intersecting issues, such as the position of women and the role of the prison-industrial complex.

For me, all these issues are connected. While over 39 million people are living with HIV, Third World governments are being forced to cut social services, including health care. The devastation and death that result deserve to be called genocide.

One of the problems with much of the activism and discourse around Africa is disregard for history. If we're serious about debt cancellation, we have to recognize the exploitation that helped create the debt in the first place. How can we understand the disparities of resources available to Africans without understanding colonization? How can we call U.S. and European countries "donors" when much of the wealth they possess was created by exploiting the labor and resources of the very continent they are claiming to help? How can we not acknowledge this? Does history have a cutoff point where we no longer have to consider previous injustices?

As we fight today's battles, we need to understand where those injustices come from. We need to see ourselves as part of a long lineage of freedom fighters and draw inspiration from battles won.