

Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, eds. *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. ix + 353 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8313-9; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-8314-6.



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Radical Black Women, Leadership, and the Struggle for Liberation

In the last two decades, a growing field of movement scholarship has complicated conventional representations of Black Power in the United States. Historians have produced biographies of civil rights leaders, social histories of postwar civil rights organizations, intellectual histories of black liberation thought, and new studies of the Black Panther Party that undermine the artificial structures traditionally used to frame and demarcate civil rights activism and Black Power resistance.[1] Building upon the memoirs of Panther members and political prisoners, and new examinations of urban politics, recent historiography has provided students with a deeper appreciation of the oppression faced by black people in the United States, the politicization of black communities, and the freedom dreams of activists.[2]

Despite the growing interest in the politics of black radicalism, the editors of *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* explain that the vital contributions and radical political perspectives of black women remain largely overlooked. In the introduction to this compilation of essays, the editors Dayo

Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard state: "Although, a new generation of scholars has greatly expanded our knowledge of black radicalism and the black freedom struggle, they have left intact a 'leading man' master narrative that misses crucial dimensions of the postwar freedom struggle and minimizes the contributions of women. Such histories have neglected crucial dimensions of the postwar black radical tradition that held black women's self-emancipation as pivotal to black liberation" (p. 2).

"Second-wave feminism" and other analytical frameworks commonly used to examine radical feminist activism also obscure the intersectional understanding of power that many black women brought into the movement circles and organizations they worked in. The consequence, the editors explain, is that the scope of black radicalism continues to be limited, models of male leadership remain intact, and black women are overlooked as figures of revolutionary resistance.

Aiming to correct the blind-spots in movement his-

toriography, *Want to Start a Revolution?* is comprised of fourteen new essays that center on leading female activists who made major contributions to freedom struggles of the postwar era. The first half of the anthology recovers the life histories and political careers of Esther Cooper Jackson, Juanita and Lillie Jackson, Vicki Garvin, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Rosa Parks. Contributing authors reveal that these women challenged notions of female decency through their political activities. They were students of radical theory, accomplished writers and editors, cultural producers, skilled organizers and charismatic speakers. As movement care-takers they were community builders, and masters at creating activist networks. Providing rich details about their early lives and the longevity of their political careers, each essay demonstrates that black women were central figures, tireless workers, and outspoken voices in popular front, civil rights, pan-African, and black nationalist movements. In the cases of Garvin and Shirley Graham Du Bois, their lifelong anti-imperialist political commitments eventually took them to Algeria, Ghana, China, and other Third World countries, where they became recognizable figures of Third World revolution.

Gender politics and the efforts of black women to create a space for intersectional struggle during the late 1960s and 1970s are the subjects of the chapters that follow. Each essay reveals the ability of radical black women to reconcile the seemingly antagonistic contradictions of nationalist and feminist movements through their intersectional understanding of oppression. Black feminist thought is revisited in a close reading of Toni Cade Bambara's classic anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), and an analysis of the political career of radical lawyer Florynce Kennedy. Chapters about Assata Shakur and the Oakland Community School highlight the gender politics of the Black Panther Party and the visionary leadership qualities that Panther women often demonstrated. The leading role of women in the Black Arts movement in Atlanta, the national welfare rights movement, and radical electoral politics are also examined in this volume. Finally, essays on the lives and solidarity work of Denise Oliver and Yuri Kuchiyama complicate the notions that revolutionary organizations were racially exclusive and opposed to coalitions.

For the most part, authors creatively mix archival research, interviews, published writings, and the reflections of movement comrades to reveal the experiences and political perspectives of women. Joy James's essay on Assata Shakur, and Margo Natalie Crawford's piece on the *The Black Woman* are also noteworthy for integrat-

ing a literary analysis and exploring the questions of hybridity, representation, and essentialism. As is the case in all collections, some contributors to *Want to Start a Revolution?* are more effective than others in conveying the radical political commitments of the women they study. Certain essays, for example, would have benefited from greater attention to the voices of the activists, and their reflections on the meaning of their work, rather than simply identifying individual accomplishments and explaining their theoretical significance. This reviewer also wonders why the critical intervention of writing women into postwar black liberation history was not brought into conversation with important scholarship that also critiques the erasure of Third World women activists as related to the ongoing cultural politics of gender and colonialism.[3] Finally, the strong focus on East Coast communities and organizations in many of the essays limits a comparative analysis of radicalism, women activists, and gender politics.

These minor shortcomings aside, *Want to Start a Revolution?* successfully meets its three goals of expanding the boundaries of black radicalism, shedding light on the labor women performed to sustain radical movements, and exploring the gender politics of black women activists (pp. 3-4). Collectively, the essays will provide activists, students, and academic specialists with powerful insights into post-World War II black freedom struggles, the de-colonial imaginary in black feminist thought, and the lives of women who joined and guided movements to transform an oppressive society. This collection will also be useful to teachers aiming to introduce students to the politics of historical memory, and the recent distortions of civil rights discourse. We owe a debt of gratitude to the editors and contributors to this collection for reminding us that in the postwar struggle for revolutionary change, as now, women of color hold up more than half the sky.

Notes

[1]. Notable biographies include Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Junior* (New York: Touchstone Press, 2000); and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Exemplary social histories that rethink civil rights activism are Charles Payne, *Iâve Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

University Press, 2003); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); and Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Knopf, 2008). Intellectual histories include Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). New perspectives on the Black Panther Party are found in Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (New York: Black Classic Press, 1998); Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Panther: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: New Press, 2006); and Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *Liberated Territory, Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[2]. There are numerous memoirs written by former Panthers, political prisoners, and POWs. Notable ones include Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968); Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970); Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973); Assata

Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987); Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992); David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993); Mumia Abu Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2008); Safiya Bukhari, *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison, and Fighting For Those Left Behind* (New York: Feminist Press, 2010); and James Yaki Sayles, *Meditations on Franz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth: New Afrikan Revolutionary Writings* (Chicago: Spear and Shield Publications, 2010). Exemplary studies of urban politics that center on black freedom struggles include Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; and Paul L. Street, *Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis: A Living Black Chicago History* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

[3]. I am thinking here of M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, South End Press, 2005).

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