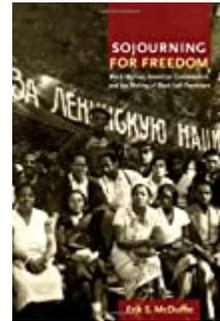




Erik S. McDuffie. *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 328 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5033-0; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5050-7.



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To argue that the history of the United States, and the various structures, processes, and events that comprise it, is shaped by the dynamics of race, class, and gender is not to make a particularly original argument. Significant and worthwhile debates continue about which of these categories might be primary; how the relationship between two or more of them might work in a given circumstance; and of course how each is connected to other irreducible categories, such as sexuality, age, ability, or indigeneity. But the overarching framework is set. Intersectionality is now paradigmatic for normal social science and humanities understandings of social and historical phenomena. The history of intersectionality, however, has been less well understood. With the publication of Erik S. McDuffie's *Sojourning for Freedom*, we now have, among other things, a much richer sense of how intersectional thought developed throughout the twentieth century.

Using black left feminism to describe the political formation that he traces, McDuffie introduces us to a group of black radical women of the Old Left. Some, like Claudia Jones, will be familiar to many readers, while others have received relatively little scholarly attention, but all are skillfully incorporated to a narrative that moves from the 1920s, when chronologies of first-wave feminism traditionally conclude, to the 1970s, when

histories of feminism's third wave often begin. Through this periodization, *Sojourning for Freedom* unmakes these waves (or at least troubles them) as it unsettles notions that cold war anti-Communism forged an impassible divide between Old Left and New Left.

The first generation of radical black women that McDuffie examines turned to the Communist Left in the 1920s. This might seem surprising in a decade that began in the aftermath of race riots and the Red Scare, but events within and beyond the United States, such as the Great Migration, the emergence of the New Woman, and the internationalist promise of the Bolshevik Revolution combined to create the circumstances in which Grace Campbell, Williana Jones (Burroughs), Hermina Dumont (Huiswoud), and Maude White (Katz) built a collective identity around shared opposition to white supremacy, Victorian morality, and imperialism. These women found their way to the Communist Left by varied routes, and their relationship with the Communist Party (CP) and its institutional allies was not without serious friction, and as such set patterns that would be repeated in later decades.

One particular strength of the book is McDuffie's careful attention in showing that the historical actors he

writes about did not have one relationship to the CP's institutional apparatus. As such, the CP provided a home, though not always a comfortable one, for black left feminism. Louise Thompson (Patterson), for example, opted to operate from within the CPUSA for most of her life, while Audley "Queen Mother" Moore broke with the party during World War II, because, by her account, the CP's leadership never accorded her appropriate respect and never gave the specificities of racial oppression their full due. In highlighting these differences, the book's portrait of black left feminism is as complex as the individuals who contributed to it.

The book's narrative shifts from the Depression to World War II, then examines the period up to Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" before turning to the sixties and beyond. Readers who have followed McDuffie's articles that take up parts of this story—about Moore, the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, or Esther Cooper Jackson—will have been anticipating this monograph, and at 220 pages (excluding back matter), *Sojourning for Freedom* is able to bring together the larger narrative that McDuffie wants to relate in a brisk but quite comprehensive manner. Tracing black left feminism from the interwar years through to the seventies in itself bolsters McDuffie's intervention in debates about the impact of the early cold war on the black Left by showing longer trajectories that contextualize the McCarthy period as certainly disruptive, but still just one moment in a political formation that took shape across four decades. The work's length, scope, and flow also make it suitable for assigning for undergraduate courses on the United States and the world, the African American freedom struggle, the cold war, and comparative social movements, or in graduate seminars across the disciplines.

This book also documents intellectual production and journalistic output, showing how articulations of "triple oppression" were produced at the meeting place of theory and historical struggle. By showing how what we now call intersectionality was developed by women who were thinking through multiple axes of oppression as part and parcel of opposing them, McDuffie reminds us that whatever critiques we may have of this framework, and whatever use we make of it in our own teaching and scholarship, intersectionality did not come to us as ab-

stract theory that was without cost to its early practitioners.

Sojourning for Freedom offers an unmistakably admiring portrait of its protagonists. McDuffie frequently highlights the courage, dignity, resourcefulness, and prescience of the women that he writes about, and some readers might find his treatment too lauding. But it would be difficult to argue that these women were anything other than brave, dignified, imaginative, and ahead of their time. And although the overall tenor tends toward admiration, *Sojourning for Freedom* does not refrain from pointing out black left feminism's moments of bowing to cold war domesticity, inattentiveness to the salience of sexuality, willful blindness to the crimes of the Soviet Union, and autobiographical inconsistency.

In terms of historiography, McDuffie's arguments recast several debates, as I hope this review has suggested. In keeping with works like Nancy Hewitt's edited *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (2010) or Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), *Sojourning for Freedom* prompts a rethinking of feminism's temporal and spatial parameters. In accord with Dayo F. Gore's *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (2011) or Van Gosse's *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History* (2005), *Sojourning for Freedom* encourages a reassessment of the early cold war as a period of total rupture for the internationalist Left. And in pointing to the existence of a long civil rights movement, *Sojourning for Freedom* belongs on a shelf alongside works like Nikhil Pal Singh's *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (2004) and James Edward Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005).

By the end of *Sojourning for Freedom*, black left feminism appears not as a reaction to Moynihan and masculinism in the 1960s, but as an intergenerational radical tradition that forged critiques of gendered racial capitalism in the previous century, before providing an influential framework for thinking about the interlocking of oppressions for our own era. But enough of this review. Go and read this very valuable book for yourself!

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