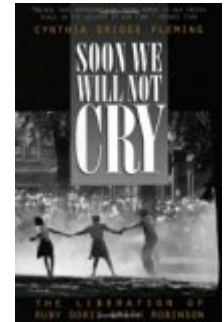


**Cynthia Griggs Fleming.** *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Smith Robinson.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. x + 228 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8476-8971-2.



**Reviewed by** Marilyn Dell Brady

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When I was in graduate school in the early 1980s, we were just discovering the absence of black women in historical scholarship. Interpretations of the Civil Rights Movement in the South during the early 1960s generally focused on the fight for "manhood." Scholars of women's history had begun to look at the white women who were involved in the movement, but they gave little attention to the impact and perspective of black women. Indicative of the state of 1980s scholarship was the title of the book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith.[1]

Now, historians are finally telling the stories of African-American women in the Civil Rights Movement, filling gaps and forcing us to rethink assumptions about gender. Cynthia Griggs Fleming's biography of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson*, is a valuable addition to this important development.

Robinson was an individual who merits our attention. Courageous and committed, she served

as a prominent leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Unlike other black women whose leadership in the movement has been examined, Robinson was young, and, until her illness and death from cancer in 1967, she combined full-time organizing with the demands of a husband and infant. Ruby Doris Smith grew up within the warmth of her family and her African-American neighborhood in Atlanta, where blacks were seeking respectability and progress in the 1940s and 1950s. Spelman College initiated Doris into the graces and academic achievements expected of Spelman women and introduced her to the emerging Civil Rights movement. Hesitantly, she followed the lead of her older sister into activism. After her initial experience with protesting and going to jail with SNCC in 1961, Ruby Doris turned her attention to the administrative needs of the new radical organization. Gradually, she took on power and authority within SNCC. Meanwhile, marriage to Clifford Robinson and the birth of their son escalated her responsibilities. As SNCC expanded and internal

conflicts increased after 1965, cancer struck Ruby Doris Robinson, ending her activism.

The strength of Fleming's biography lies in the detailed narrative she provides of Robinson's life. Challenging simple generalizations, Fleming shows us the conflicts and contradictions that Ruby Doris Robinson and her co-workers experienced within themselves and their organization. Particularly compelling is Fleming's depiction of the shifting gender roles among the black activists within SNCC. As Fleming describes, Robinson and her co-workers moved within the boundaries of their culture's definition of proper gender roles, but those definitions were being challenged.

Fleming's treatment of Robinson's decision to wear neat skirts and an Afro makes the issues of self-image and womanhood very down-to-earth. Discussion of the practical, non-political advantages that Afros had for black women in the movement provides readers with a concrete sense of their daily choices. In addition, Fleming depicts Robinson's choice to marry and have a child as reflective of her sense that a woman's identity grew out of motherhood. Many African-American women in the movement were past childbearing age or chose not to become mothers, but the intensity of Robinson's work in SNCC was not enough for her. Perhaps she felt the need to balance her unusual leadership role with a more traditionally defined sense of womanhood.

On the question of whether sexism existed within SNCC, Fleming sets forth examples that show both the presence of sexism and resistance to it. Fleming portrays Robinson as both a victim of sexism and an active opponent to it. Fleming makes clear that the climate of SNCC was far from static, with the early sense of intimacy and experimentation fading as SNCC moved into the lime-light and "macho" behavior increased. She describes Robinson's anger at Stokeley Carmichael's lack of respect for women in the movement, but also points out that, unlike other Civil Rights organizations of the period, SNCC did allow women

such as Robinson to move into positions of formal leadership.

Robinson held direct responsibility for managing workers and supplies spread out over a large area. Her position sometimes put her in conflict with the African-American men whom she supervised. At the mercy of her power to grant such desperately needed resources as money and available automobiles, the men's words reflected highly gendered complaints about their need to ask "Big Mama" and their resentment of her strict demands. In discussing these men, Fleming provides insight into gender roles for men as well as for women in SNCC.

According to Fleming, Robinson was outgoing and had a large group of male and female friends. Nothing, however, indicates that Robinson had the strong ties to other black women that often characterized women activists' lives. Ella Baker, for example, is mentioned as a leader in the creation of SNCC, but her relationship to Ruby Doris is not discussed. In fact, Fleming pays much more attention to Robinson's attitude toward white women in the movement than to black women.

For Fleming, the ambivalence and complexity of Robinson's relations with white women belie claims that she hated these women or was jealous of them. Robinson was near the peak of her power within SNCC in 1964, when the organization committed itself to Mississippi Freedom Summer. She feared that bringing black and white northern students into the state would create problems. Strongly committed to putting the movement first, she demanded that others follow her example. Because Robinson believed that interracial sexual relations threatened the movement, she was critical of white female workers. She also expressed indignation when black male leaders left wives and children to take white women as partners. Fleming criticizes the more simplistic assessments of Robinson by Sara Evans and Mary Rothchild, white historians of women in the Civil Rights Movement, and provides details that establish the

validity of her position. The fact that both authors published a decade or two ago makes Fleming's comments somewhat dated, however.

Much of the abundant detail that Fleming supplies comes from oral interviews with those who knew Ruby Doris Robinson well. Fleming herself collected many of these, and others had been published previously. Use of the interviews provides the reader with an immediate, personal perspective on Robinson, as well as with anecdotes about her life. The perspective we get from these sources invigorates the narrative of the movement.

Fleming's heavy reliance on oral histories is, however, problematic as well. Many of those interviewed belonged to Robinson's biological and SNCC families. After her death, they were unlikely to be critical of her. Fleming provides little distance from or context for her sources' personal comments. More fundamentally, lack of historical and historiographical context weakens Fleming's analysis of causality, Robinson's motivation, and her impact. Although Fleming cites some of the work on the Civil Rights Movement, she seldom engages with current scholars. Her omission of the abundant scholarship on women's history, SNCC, and the movement generally excludes her from the conversations fundamental to the historical enterprise.

The story of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson certainly deserves a wide readership, but readers too young to remember the Civil Rights Movement may find Fleming's account difficult to follow. Key players and events are not always clearly identified in terms of the larger movement. Better editing and the removal of repetitive phrases would also have helped the book's readability. In addition, while Fleming asks important questions, she seldom gives explicit answers. Even the book's title lacks an explicit unifying explanation. Why does "Soon We Will Not Cry" epitomize Robinson's life? What constitutes her "Liberation"?

Fleming's biography is a narrative history, not an analytical book. She seldom uses the theoretical language of race and gender, politicalization and contextualization. Some readers may want more context and theory. Good stories, however, challenge neat categorizations and carry their own value. Through her use of narrative, Fleming shows us the complexities and contradictions of Robinson and her co-workers. In doing so, she enriches our understanding of African-American womanhood and the Civil Rights Movement.

#### Note

[1]. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982).

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