

# H-Net Reviews

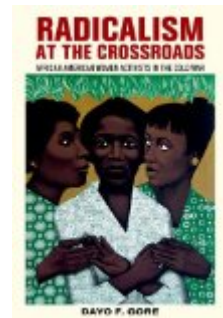
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dayo F. Gore. *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 240 pp. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3236-6.

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Commissioned by Ian Rocksborough-Smith



In this tidy monograph, Dayo Gore, assistant professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, uncovers the actions of leftist African American women who worked for racial and gender equality in the years following World War II. Despite the paranoia and repression of the McCarthy period, these determined women refused to relinquish their connections with communism, which were forged in New York City during the 1930s and deeply influenced by the Great Depression. Many of the women were what Gore terms "lesser-known activists": Vicki Garvin, Yvonne Gregory, and Thelma Dale Perkins, though she includes bigger names like Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress (p. 3). Whether or not they were well known, Gore shows, through a kind of collective political biography, how Garvin and the others contributed as "national leaders, intellectual architects, and strategists in building the black freedom struggle, U.S. radicalism, and feminist politics" (p. 6).

Though the book's subtitle specifies the Cold War as the historical timeframe of the study, Gore opens with a chapter on the relationship between the black Left and the Communist Party USA in the 1930s and 1940s. Here she ably shows how location (New York City) and circumstance (the Great Depression) combined to provide some African American women an education and interest in the kind of politics that many other people of that time and place would have considered un-American. That the American Left was dominated by white men ultimately encouraged these black women to construct an economic critique of the United States that was informed by race and gender. These activist women, in fact, insisted on the inextricable link between economics, race, and gender.

The second chapter demonstrates how this all played out in the immediate postwar period as "these women radicals crafted their own nascent feminist politics that called attention to the impact of social constructions of race and class on women's lives" (p. 47). Most concentrated on critiquing in print—what Gore refers to as cultural writing—the renewed emphasis on marriage, nuclear families, and suburbia. Many of these pieces, with their strong feminist bent, appeared in *Negro Digest*, a popular periodical first published in 1942. The articles focused on a distinct black womanhood, which involved defending and celebrating the accomplishments of career women. This led to discussions about black women's equality with black men in the home and family and with white women in public organizations, such as the Congress of American Women.

The Rosa Lee Ingram case frames the subject of civil rights activism in chapter 3, and the dramatic murder story makes this the most compelling chapter of the book. In 1947, Ingram, a widow living just outside Americus, Georgia, and her two teenaged sons killed a white sharecropper, John Ethrop Stratford. Stratford worked a piece of land next to one sharecropped by the Ingrams and had a dispute with the family that escalated into a violent confrontation. Though Stratford had a gun and instigated the fight by hitting Rosa Lee first, an all-white, all-male jury found Ingram and her sons guilty of murder in 1948, and they were sentenced to death.

Concerned that the Ingrams had not been tried by a jury of their peers, and outraged that the Georgia legal system did not recognize Rosa Lee's right to self-defense, organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Com-

munist Party-affiliated Civil Rights Congress became involved in the appeals process. African American women were especially drawn to this civil rights case, through smaller organizations like the United Women's Committee to Save the Ingram Family, because of what it meant in terms of definitions of black womanhood. By 1949, well after the original trial and conviction, it became public knowledge that the dispute between Stratford and the Ingrams stemmed from Stratford's unwanted sexual advances toward Rosa Lee. She had been protecting herself against sexual assault, assisted by her sons, when they killed Stratford. Black women activists highlighted the sexual aspects of the case, insisting that she had the right to protect her own body. Despite all the high-profile attempts to free the Ingrams, they spent more than ten years in jail before they were finally granted parole, but they were not pardoned. In addition to the almost intractable Jim Crow laws and sentiments, those activists working on behalf of the Ingrams may have been further hampered by their connections with leftist politics.

Chapter 4, "Race and Gender at Work," centers on African American women's labor organization and activism through the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC), which was founded in 1951. Its female members "insisted that trade unions should view the political struggles for African American civil rights and women's equality as key labor issues" (p. 101). Marvel Cooke, a journalist who published in African American newspapers, routinely exposed the problems facing domestic workers. Garvin, who earned a master's degree in economics from Smith College, worked for the National War Labor Board, before moving on to the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) United Office and Professional Workers of America Union. After disagreements with the CIO's anti-Communist stance, she took a position on the editorial board of the newspaper *Freedom*, joined the Harlem Trade Union Council, and helped found the

NNLC, which welcomed members who retained ties to the Communist Party. During the early 1950s, the NNLC successfully convinced Sears, Roebuck and Company to open up more clerical and sales positions to African American women. It also launched campaigns against General Electric, Ford, and Westinghouse to get them to hire more black women. But the NNLC ultimately could not survive the strong anti-Communist sentiment of the Cold War period, and it disbanded in 1956.

In her final chapter, Gore explores the connections between the African American women radicals and the black freedom movement of the 1960s and 1970s, because the "demise of black left institutional spaces ... forced many of the women to find new venues for employment, as well as activism" (p. 131). They became involved in social movements through their organizations, such as the Negro Women's Action Committee, which supported the 1960 student sit-ins at lunch counters throughout the South. In 1961, they helped launch the quarterly journal *Freedomways*, then worked on programs to end racism in the New York City public schools and to promote international ties with Communist countries and decolonizing nations, and supported the "Free Angela Davis" campaign and the "Free Joan Little" movement.

Overall, Gore has accomplished what she set out to do: "insert both the analysis of black women radicals and their collective experiences into the history of postwar radicalism by centering their insights and documenting their contributions to sustaining a black left politics well into the 1970s" (p. 162). What really shines through—and what constitutes the major scholarly contribution—is Gore's excavation of crucial foundations of the more familiar civil rights stories of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Woolworth's sit-ins that are already the subject of so many studies. The events she chronicles, with women front and center, serve as a reminder that such high-profile achievements have a long, complex history.

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