In *Radical Intellect*, Christopher M. Tinson explores the role of the monthly magazine *Liberator* in disseminating an internationalist vision of black radicalism during the 1960s. The New York-based magazine, which burst into public view with its coverage of African independence movements following the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961, offered a diverse range of perspectives that included political commentary, cultural criticism, and an incipient feminist viewpoint. This nuanced, insightful study demonstrates how *Liberator* writers and editors both shaped and responded to a historical moment marked by the triumphs and struggles of the civil rights movement, the growth of black nationalism, and the nascent Black Power movement. For historians of journalism, *Radical Intellect* offers an in-depth look at a less well-studied publication that combined activist journalism with cultural criticism—particularly of theater and jazz—through the tumultuous 1960s and into the early 1970s. While some of the *Liberator*’s writers and editorial board members—including Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Harold Cruse, Askia Touré, and Toni Cade Bambara—are well known, many others are far less so. *Radical Intellect* is particularly valuable in its efforts to unpack how the *Liberator*’s unique voice reflected and influenced the diversity of black radical thought in the 1960s.

Tinson, an associate professor of history and director of African American studies at St. Louis University, divides his study into five chapters. Each looks at different facets of *Liberator*’s influence and coverage until its last issue in 1971, a casualty of declining funds and staff turnover. The first chapter examines the magazine’s origins as an outgrowth of the Liberation Committee for Africa (LCA), an “internationalist ad hoc group” (p. 11) that sought to connect the struggles of newly independent African nations with African American activism in the United States. The LCA’s founders, *Liberator* editor-in-chief Dan Watts, editor Pete Beveridge, and contributing writer Richard Gibson, incorporated this diasporic consciousness and interest in working across racial and class lines into *Liberator* beginning with its first issue in March 1961. As Tinson argues, the group’s formation and core values were also influenced by personal ties formed in 1960s New York City. Watts and his wife lived in the same apartment building as Gibson, then working for CBS, and musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, who wrote the African liberation-inspired “WE INSIST! Freedom Now Suite” in 1960. Lincoln, the vocalist and actress, later contributed poetry and articles to the magazine in the mid-1960s (pp. 87-88). *Liberator*’s early staff members established its consistent internationalist voice “criticiz[ing] racial capitalism’s function in the perpetuation of African and African-American exploitation,” Tinson writes, noting that the magazine also rejected a rigid alliance to a single party line or solution (p. 33). From its first issue, *Liberator* consistently turned a critical eye to mainstream civil rights activism and advocated for self-defense, for example noting that the nonviolence espoused by Freedom Riders in the early 1960s would not necessarily protect participants from violent reprisals.

A second chapter focuses on *Liberator*’s origins during a watershed moment for African independence. Tinson argues that the magazine can be viewed part of a “tradition of grassroots black radicalism” that encompasses groups ranging ideologically from the politically conser-
ervative African Nationalist Pioneer Movement to those that were antinationalist domestically but pro-nationalist regarding Africa, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) (p. 39). The anticolonial viewpoint expressed by the LCA and Liberator writers and activists particularly stood in contrast with AMSAC, which was formed in 1957. While the organization published collections of African American writing on Africa by prominent scholars such as St. Claire Drake and Adélaïde Cromwell Hill and encouraged cultural exchanges between newly independent African nations and the US, it also received funding from the Central Intelligence Agency Committee on Race and Class in World Affairs. Tinson instead links Liberator with earlier left-wing groups such as the Committee on African Affairs, spearheaded by Alpheaus Hunton and W. E. B. Du Bois. Radical Intellect particularly demonstrates the magazine’s transnational reach, highlighting its coverage of Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe’s Nigeria, the tumultuous future of Congolese politics in the wake of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, and apartheid-era South Africa.[1] In addition to coverage gathered from its own journalists and networks, such as African students and government officials, the magazine also included reporting from African sources such as The Voice of Africa, the Nigerian Information Service, and the Algeria-based Révolution Africaine, for which Richard Gibson served as English-language news editor.

In this chapter and other sections of the book, letters to the editor from Liberator readers also highlight how the magazine’s relatively open editorial policy allowed readers to critique and expand aspects of its coverage. A Kenyan student living in Harlem, Tinson notes, challenged the magazine’s reporting on a controversial 1969 speech to a Harlem audience by Tom Mboya, Kenya’s minister of economic planning and development. Questioning the audience’s decision to hurl eggs at Mboya for reportedly anti-pan-Africanist comments, the student argued that “all that is required is the will to accept rather than romanticize Africa” (p. 71).

In a similar vein, one of the most intriguing sections of Radical Intellect is a chapter focusing on black women’s activism and writing in Liberator. While Tinson notes that the magazine’s inclusion of women’s voices and issues was “more pragmatic than ideological,” he highlights a broad range of female writers, activists, and issues included in its decade-plus publication history (p. 74). These included labor issues, such as union organizer Selma Sparks’s 1963 reporting on the situation of black and Puerto Rican garment workers in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; Barbara Butler’s 1966 analysis of urban renewal plans in New York, and Evelyn Rodgers’s 1966 discussion of Ebony magazine’s white-oriented beauty standards. Discussions of black families, masculinity, and interracial relationships, Tinson notes, particularly came into focus following the publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial report The Negro Family: A Case for National Action in 1965, inspiring a variety of responses, including an editorial from Liberator editor-in-chief Dan Watts on birth control. The magazine’s inclusion of women’s voices was not always consistent, but it dedicated its May 1966 issue to black women’s perspectives, featuring five articles along with poetry by Sonia Sanchez, further cementing ties to the Black Arts movement.

In the final chapter, Tinson examines how Liberator attempted to articulate a vision of black radical aesthetics, establishing a link with the flourishing Black Arts movement and cultural criticism of literature, visual arts, music, film, and theater. The magazine provided a key venue for the actor and writer Clebert Ford, who argued that black artists needed to assume “total involvement in America’s theatrical currents, and on every level from producer to backstage, from set designer to choreographer, writer and director” (quoted, p. 193). In addition to its cultural criticism by writers such as Larry Neal and Askia Touré, Tinson also highlights the magazine’s interviews with jazz’s avant-garde of the mid-1960s, including saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Archie Shepp. In an interview with Amiri Baraka, Shepp memorably characterized jazz musicians as not only artists but a “reporter ... an aesthetic journalist of America” (quoted, p. 226). In both its cultural and political coverage, Tinson argues that Liberator exemplified somewhat of a generational divide among black writer-activists. While editor-in-chief Dan Watts, a former architect, remained a consistent voice, along with support from older figures such as Langston Hughes and Caribbean radical activist Richard B. Moore, some of the magazine’s early contributors and supporters—such as James Baldwin and Ossie Davis—left Liberator’s orbit in the wake of disputes over its coverage.

In addition to scouring the magazine’s archive and sister publications such as the magazine Freedomways, Tinson’s study also benefits from his interviews with many of the magazine’s contributors and supporters. Dan Watts is perhaps the one notable exception, making his motivations in creating an open editorial policy inviting debate somewhat of a mystery. However, the book makes a compelling case for Liberator as a key site
where black activists, writers, and artists, some prominent and others far less so, “made history by not being afraid to openly challenge the status quo and publicly disagree with the expectations of respectable leadership” (p. 242). By uncovering Liberator’s influence and contributions to a lively debate, Radical Intellect offers a valuable cultural and intellectual history of black radicalism and global freedom struggles in the 1960s.

Note

[1]. As Leslie James has detailed, Azikiwe was previously a journalist, pioneering a distinctive, reporting voice with his Zik press newspapers, including the West African Pilot. Leslie James, “The Flying Newspapermen and the Time-Space of Late Colonial Nigeria,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 60, no. 3 (2018): 569-98.

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