

# REVIEW

## “Triple Oppression” to “Freedom Dreams”

By Alan Wald

### **Black Internationalist Feminism:**

Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995

By Cheryl Higashida

Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011, 250 pages, hardback \$50.

### **Radicalism at the Crossroads:** African American Women Activists in the Cold War

By Dayo F. Gore

New York: New York University Press, 2011, 229 pages, paper \$23.

### **Sojourning for Freedom:**

Black Women, American Communism,  
and the Making of Black Left Feminism

By Erik S. McDuffie

Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011, 311 pages, paper \$23.95.

HARRIET TUBMAN, THE former slave turned Abolitionist, once said: “Every great dream begins with a dreamer.”<sup>1</sup> The concurrent publication of three evocative and absorbing studies of the “freedom dreams” of African-American women associated with the mid-20th century Communist movement is something of an event.<sup>2</sup>

Through an examination of the archival record, combined with numerous oral histories and close readings of political and literary texts, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, *Radicalism at the Crossroads* and *Sojourning for Freedom* provide at their very best some compelling history with engaging portraits. All are indispensable reading for the project of intellectual decolonization of the Cold War era, a subject still marred by historical obfuscations traceable to the polarized thinking of the time.

As an ensemble, these books tell a hugely ambitious, wide-ranging story, one that is almost always a delight to read. The remarkably detailed chronicles are dense-with-thinking in the elaboration of at least three themes held in common, with some

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Alan Wald, an editor of *Against the Current*, recently contributed essays on *Marxists Willard Motley and Theodore Ward to Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), and wrote the Foreword to *Lloyd Brown's Communist novel Iron City in the Northeastern University Press Library of Black Literature*.

variations:

1) All three reject the declension narrative of the Old Left as a movement destroyed or rendered impotent in the post-World War II years; they forward an anticipatory narrative of linking Communism's hard-fought battles to the coming political upsurge of the 1960s and after. In this sense they enrich Jacqueline Dowd Hall's 2005 thesis of “The Long Civil Rights Movement”<sup>3</sup> by revising what Dayo Gore describes as “the historical periodization that ignores Cold War black radicalism [in order to] uncover its connections to later decades of activism, including African American civil rights activism after 1955.”<sup>4</sup>

More specifically, the three reinforce the argument of Nikhil Pal Singh's 2005 *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* on behalf of the existence of “a more or less consistent tradition of radical dissent” from the Great Depression forward.<sup>5</sup>

2) All regard the paramount intellectual bridge between Black women activists of the Old Left and later developments to be a hitherto hidden history of “intersectionality,” today's preeminent sociological method in feminist studies.

Intersectionality, first fully elaborated in the late 1980s, refers to the examination of interactions among manifold dimensions and modalities of social relationships and social formations that contribute to social inequality.<sup>6</sup> Higashida et al argue that the post-World War II Communist Party's concept of the “triple oppression” of Black women workers (that is, by race, class, and gender, all of which must be addressed) was a decisive anticipation of intersectionality.

Higashida and McDuffie also observe, with somewhat differing emphases, that the term “triple oppression” initially emerged in Party circles in the 1930s, although all three are unanimous that the formulation achieved a pre-eminent expression in a 1949 *Political Affairs* essay by Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman.”

The concept was subsequently articulated through activism, especially the Women's Committee for Equal Justice (an offshoot of the Communist-led Civil Rights Congress), and the brief organization of Sojourners

for Truth and Justice in 1951. The first was formed around the political defense case of Rosa Lee Ingram (convicted in 1947 for killing a white man in self-defense), and the second protested Cold War racism.

Higashida and McDuffie find a further manifestation of the “triple oppression” argument in the statement of the Combahee River Collective (1974-80), a Black feminist lesbian organization, while all three point to its presence in the pages of *Freedomways* magazine (1961-85), an African-American political and cultural journal supported by but broader than the Communist Party.

Higashida alone pursues the evolution and transformation of this thinking in works of imaginative literature published through 1995, tracking the interaction between a sympathy for national liberation movements and a growing critique of heteronormativity.

While her most brilliant chapter addresses Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*, she also provides impressively original readings of Alice Childress's *A Short Walk* (1979), Rosa Guy's *The Sun, The Sea, a Touch of the Wind* (1995), Audre Lorde's later poetry, and Maya Angelou's last three volumes of autobiography.

3) Through their examination of the biographies of several dozen Black pro-Communist women, overlapping in a few instances, the authors confirm the intellectual shallowness of over-arching applications of the political category of “Stalinism.”

Despite its clarifying potential when used in a sophisticated manner to treat an ideology, social system or political organization, “Stalinism” can be an oversimplifying lens through which to evaluate the thinking, personalities and life activities of diverse individuals, not to mention works of the artistic imagination.

A few of the names in these books will be familiar from earlier studies — obviously Party leader Claudia Jones (1915-64) and playwright Lorraine Hansberry (1930-65), outstanding Communist revolutionaries who died painfully young. But some of the other fascinating key players have hitherto appeared in historical studies and oral histories as human jigsaw puzzles, the pieces of their lives and activities scattered over time and nearly lost.

The list of protagonists begins with

Grace Campbell (1883-1943), perhaps the first Black woman Communist; Williana Burroughs (1882-1945), a teacher who worked frequently in the Soviet Union; Audley Moore (1898-1966), a Harlem Communist leader who became an initiator of the Republic of New Afrika; and Esther Jackson (b.1917), a founding editor of *Freedomways*.

These and dozens of others constituted a tradition of pro-Communist Black women, even as the authors emphatically teach us that each activist and writer held membership in multiple communities, some unspoken. This diversity is demonstrated by indicating their different routes into and in some cases their trajectories out of the Communist movement; their contrasting organizational roles and commitments; and their various personal lives, in a few instances recalling the early 20th century “New Woman” (a term for independent career women who pushed the limits of male dominated society), or even suggestive of a lesbian-feminism *avant la lettre*.

### Problems of Political Terminology

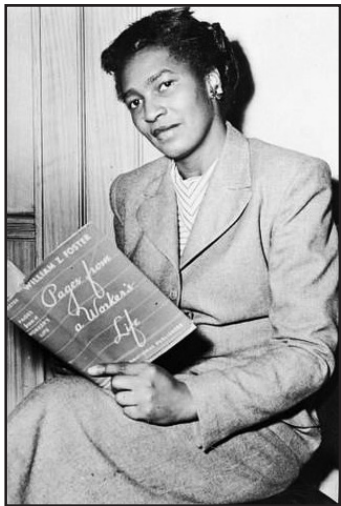
One of the most vexing challenges faced by the authors of these books is to identify the appropriate political terminology for describing the protagonists during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. One can understand the desire to use familiar and currently fashionable language to render a subject pertinent to a present-day readership, but an anachronistic vocabulary can diminish distinctions in historical periods marked by dissimilar strategic options and kinds of consciousness about one’s identity. Over-reliance on modern expressions can also make it seem as if one is writing backwards through contemporary definitions or treating the past as simply a future waiting to happen.

McDuffie opts for “Black Left Feminists,” a formula he borrows from literary scholar Mary Helen Washington and which he finds superior to the paradigm of the “radical black female subject” used by Carole Boyce Davis in her *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (2008).

Prior to the 1960s, however, none of the women would have called themselves “feminists” (a politics they associated with middle-class white women, often seen as racist and even anti-Semitic), or “Black” (judged to be offensive and as a rule replaced by “Negro”). Politically they described themselves as “Communists” or “Progressives,” a controversial component of but hardly synonymous with the “Left.”

Higashida refers to the women in her study as “Black Internationalist Feminists,” and her first and third terms-of-choice

become increasingly comfortable as she is largely concerned with creative writing after the 1960s and 1970s. But there is a snag in that the “internationalism” of the pro-Communist tradition was originally circumscribed by Soviet foreign policy. It is always a mis-



Claudia Jones wrote about “triple oppression” in her 1949 essay.

take to confuse well-meaning political aspirations with the realities of actual practice; one’s analysis morphs into hagiography.

Regrettably, for the pro-Communist tradition, “Internationalism” in 1936 in Spain meant following the Soviet orientation of crushing the indigenous social revolution; in 1939 in East Central Europe, endorsing the USSR’s sub-

jugation of the population of half of Poland and then moving north to attack Finland; in World War II, subordinating the colonial revolution (such as in India) and the rights of the internally-colonized (most obviously Japanese-Americans) to the racism of the Grand Alliance; and so on.

Although pro-Communists after World War II were usually on the mark in their exposés of Western colonialism, a kind of “selective internationalism” persisted in the 1950s and 1960s through the perpetration of the misconception that certain self-proclaimed “socialist” regimes (China, North Korea) and affiliated political parties objectively represented the long-term interests of all the oppressed.

Dayo Gore manages to avoid many of the tripwires of the terminology quandary by frequently using plainer phrases such as “CP-affiliated black women activists.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, it is Higashida who puts forward the most thought-provoking divergence of opinion in these books by centering her argument around the dialectic of gender and national liberation as it evolved to the end of the 20th century. In her outlook, the strength of Jones’ “triple oppression” argument is that it was rooted in a revival of the Communists’ “Black Belt” thesis following the 1946 expulsion of Party leader Earl Browder.<sup>8</sup>

Higashida regards this theory as a foundation, more apparent in *Freedomways* than in the anti-nationalist Combahee River Collective statement, for the freedom dreams of a “nationalist internationalism.” Her group of Black women writers would increasingly foreground this ideal as a com-

ponent of their struggle against heterosexism and patriarchy.

### A Janus-Faced Legacy

The effort to find a balance in judging the Janus-faced legacy of Communism is more often than not a thankless task. Pro-Soviet Communism in the United States was a courageous vanguard against racism, colonialism and class exploitation that simultaneously lauded a police state regime under Stalin.<sup>9</sup>

Faced with the palpable McCarthyite repression of the 1950s, non-Communist Party political activists at the time should have prioritized civil rights and liberties especially in relation to the persecuted minority of “Reds.”

But 50 years later, a radical scholar has the different task of finding some means to treat these mostly-deceased pro-Communist protagonists with proper respect while not being afraid to identify embellishments, flaws and self-delusions in some of their diagnoses. Every effort to tell this story seems to be off-balance in its own ways.

To be sure, the authors of these three books show once again that the Communist Party was not politically seamless or its interventions entirely stage-managed; to say its members were wrong in their judgments is not to declare them malleable instruments or dupes. McDuffie, for example, argues that the Southern Negro Youth Congress, led by Communists such as Esther Jackson, in effect supported the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s campaign for “Double V” (victory against international fascism and domestic racism) in opposition to the Party’s national line which held that “Double V” was detrimental to national unity.<sup>10</sup>

Gore shows that the all-Black women’s organization Sojourners for Truth and Justice, which had a strong Party presence, was itself controversial in the Communist movement.<sup>11</sup> By introducing the voices of Black Communist women, these scholars set a new agenda for understanding the movement, demonstrating the presence of a kind of dissenting Marxism in the domestic arena of practical Party work.

However, when it comes to adherence to Soviet foreign policy and the view of the USSR and its “Dear Leader” Stalin as the chief agent of world peace and justice, the books show us only conformity, whether one looks to institutional policy, rank-and-file practice, or these same voices. Even among those African Americans who departed the Party, in 1956 if not earlier, the horrible facts of Stalinist oppression are never cited as a reason for the separation — the books report only grievances around lack of attention to anti-racism or personal gripes.

One would like to see some sympathetic speculation about this phenomenon in regard to the psychology of at least a



Three African-American women Communists who explored the dynamics of race, class and gender: Audley "Queen Mother" Moore, Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry (left to right).

few individuals, the kind that produced the heart-felt, richly textured explorations of the Communist experience available in George Charney's *A Long Journey* (1968) and Junius Irving Scales' *Cause at Heart* (1987). Perhaps the truth was too upsetting to be fully registered; former Communists, like others, are prone to self-redacting, editing and erasing memories.

### "Not Without Contradictions"

Like all of us who have felt passionate commitments at certain points, the fascinating activists and writers featured in these books were handcuffed to history. But writing in the new millennium, the three authors are least rewarding when they replicate too closely the potentially explainable blind-spots of those protagonists who remained loyal to the Communist worldview.

McDuffie provides necessary critical distance when he skeptically scrutinizes the oral history of Audley "Queen Mother" Moore in relation to her bolting the Party during the Cold War; he claims that her move to Black Nationalism was actually prompted due to fear of Red-baiting and repression.<sup>12</sup> Yet he seems unshakably under the spell of the charismatic Esther Jackson, not even raising an eyebrow when she boasts (in 2002!) of her life-long uncritical idolization of Dolores Ibárruri (1895-1989).<sup>13</sup>

Where awkward political questions are at issue, the response is silence or to resort to euphemisms and evasion. Scholars hoping to foment a Marxism appropriate to our own time should at least occasionally ask the question of whether even the most admirable of the people trapped in the ambiguities of an earlier time allowed themselves to become fully conscious of reality.

McDuffie states that "black women radicals were not without contradictions" and that "they regularly followed Party directives,

sometimes supporting policies that were indefensible."<sup>14</sup> Yet it is hard to figure out what the "contradictions" and "indefensible positions" actually were, and the degree to which these are admissions that fully face up to the truly distressing historical issues.

The contrast is dramatic in regard to the candor of Marxist historian Robin D. G. Kelley in his 2002 *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Here is how Kelley addresses the politics of the two most



prominent Black males associated with the women featured in these three studies: "Unfortunately, neither [W. E. B.] Du Bois nor [Paul] Robeson or anyone else with a continuing connection to the [pro-Communist] Left had anything to say about Stalin's atrocities — the political assassinations, the gulags, the Soviet state's hidden war against political dissidents and Russian Jews."<sup>15</sup>

Kelley is also worth quoting as a balance to Higashida's unnuanced, sunny perspective on "Third Worldist national liberation movements," which are only to be criticized for their "often virulent heteropatriarchy..."<sup>16</sup> In reference to his own survey of movements in the United States, Africa, Asia and Latin America, Kelley observes: "Some of the radical movements I write about in the pages that follow have done awful things in the name of liberation, often under the premise that the ends justifies the means. Communists, black nationalists, Third World liberation movements — all left us stimulating and even visionary sketches of what the future should be, but they have also been complicit in acts of violence and oppression, through either their actions or their silence. No one's hands are completely clean."<sup>17</sup>

It may be that the three authors think that engaging this history, even in a paragraph, will muddy the waters. Yet by ignoring it, or gliding too fast over problematic aspects, they make it seem as if there were something here that needs to be hidden. This results in a Zero Sum Game inasmuch as the organizations and publications that

once brought young people under the spell of Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China, or Peru's Shining Path are today as deserted as Checkpoint Charlie.

Critical-minded readers will sense that part of the story is missing and will be forced to go elsewhere in search of the facts, which may come packaged with the anti-communist clichés of jaded liberalism.

My own view is that Kelley's candor can actually be consistent with the central thrust of the scholarship in these books. After all, the fundamental idea of "triple oppression" emerged from both revolutionary activism and critical-minded theory.

In Claudia Jones' writing, it represented a willingness to challenge one's own allies and comrades in the movement. Moreover, its modern descendant "intersectionality" is a method that comes from thinking through the multiple axes of oppression. These approaches are perfect for eradicating the legacy of Cold War bipolar thinking in favor of casting a caustic, un sentimental eye on the liberationist claims of all political camps.



### The Limits of Tolerable Politics

Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall wrote precisely on this matter just two years ago, addressing the importance of the "first" New Left that was born in 1956: "a conjuncture — not just a year — bounded on one side by the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks and on the other by the British and French invasion of the Suez Canal zone. These two events, whose dramatic impact was heightened by the fact that they occurred within days of each other, unmasked the underlying violence and aggression latent in the two systems that dominated political life at the time — Western imperialism and Stalinism... In a deeper sense, they defined for people of my generation the boundaries and limits of tolerable politics."<sup>18</sup>

These were also the "boundaries" of "tolerable politics" at least since the early 1930s, when the stories in these books



mostly begin, but then they were harder to see, and it was much harder to know what to do about Western democratic imperialism once virulent fascism emerged as a force that could be halted only by taking up arms. To embrace the perspectives of Kelley and Hall, it is true, requires a resolute willingness to enter places of contradiction and deep disturbance, and to resist pressure to construct narratives that resolve anxieties. But that is where revolutionary internationalists must go.

The research in these books, all of which are gutsy in affirming the “missing link” of Communism, can only benefit from such an enrichment and involvedness of perspective. In particular, the books’ mention of the Party’s abandonment of the Black Belt thesis and the wartime retreat from anti-racist struggle, and the occasional allusions to atrocities that occurred in the USSR, will become more understandable.

At present these episodes are accounted for mainly through the scapegoating of individual leaders, Earl Browder and Joseph Stalin. But a clarification really requires a Marxist conceptual perspective on the contradictions of the Popular Front strategy and evolution of the Russian Revolution.

### A Tricky Category

Although I lack the qualifications to provide a comprehensive commentary on all aspects of these books, three concluding observations will suggest supplementary reasons why they merit notice.

First, the intellectual argument about the influence of “triple oppression” thinking and activism that paved the way to the Combahee River Collective and “intersectionality” is an enormous achievement. “Influence,” however, is a tricky category of evaluation in intellectual history; the word can suggest anything from a loose connection to a one-to-one transmission.

A common argument for recovery of an earlier text or episode is that it is vital because it was “influential” on a distinguished later development. But the follow-up of wide-ranging and rigorous investigations can sometimes conclude that a later occurrence is the product of a more intricate story, or stories, or affinities in common, pre-existing needs, selective adaptations, and out-and-out misinterpretation. I anticipate that much further research on the genealogy of intersectionality will be inspired by the preliminary mapping inaugurated by McDuffie and the others.

A second area of fascination is the authors’ establishing a longer trajectory of Communist commitment in a way that forces the reader to recontextualize other powerful narratives of the mid-20th century Left. The result is a freshly-conceived Cold War historical moment of dissonant trajectories.

Among the most destabilized con-

ventions are Right-wing accounts of Communists as Soviet agents, and Left-wing perceptions of Black feminism as a reaction to the 1965 Moynihan Report on “The Negro Family” and the excesses of masculinist Black Nationalism.

Gore’s writing especially transforms this Cold War moment into a conjuncture of dissonance, a multiplicity and variety of trajectories. To understand such “non-contemporary contemporaneities” may necessitate a Marxist theory of compound historical time, a project suggested recently in a brilliant essay by Alex Callinicos about the work of French Marxist Daniel Bensaid.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, one must endorse an observation of Cheryl Higashida: “I see my study not as the final word on Black feminist radicalism, but as part of a broader conversation that must continue to excavate but also look beyond the Communist Party.”<sup>20</sup> From the point of view of reconstructing a revolutionary internationalist framework that includes aspects of the Communist legacy, a small if indispensable part of the conversation should include various components of the much-fragmented Trotskyist movement.

Of course, this political current itself is long past, and in the midst of its ruins in dogmatic sectarianism one is unlikely to discover a body of achievement regarding Black women that is remotely comparable to the rich Communist heritage. On the other hand, among Trotskyism’s genuine monuments one finds revolutionary alternatives in theory and practice to both Stalinism and Cold War liberalism, both permanently marred by non-biodegradable stains of complicity with the “two systems” repudiated by Stuart Hall.<sup>21</sup>

Inasmuch as Cheryl Higashida, Dayo Gore and Erik McDuffie are radical scholars whose reader-friendly work is informed by path-breaking research in political and personal biography, these and many more areas of inquiry are now squarely before us.

As authors of first books who are writing in pioneer country, somewhat beyond fixed laws, they are to be particularly applauded for a skill in conveying complex ideas in an accessible and convincing way, and for providing three eye-opening guides to the interplay of voices and ideas rarely heard in earlier studies of the Left. The result is a treasure trove for academics and activists alike. §

### Notes

1. Quoted in Zachary Martin, *Martyr to Freedom: The Life and Death of Captain Daniel Drayton* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), v.
2. Robin D. G. Kelley memorably used the phrase “freedom dreams” to designate the liberatory desires of “those marginalized black activists who proposed a different way out of our contradictions” in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), xii.
3. See Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233-54. The argument, however, has not gone without some strong criticism from the Left; see Sundiata

Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Freedom Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of African American History* 92, #2 (Spring 2007): 265-89.

4. Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 8.
5. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 252-3.
6. The primary theorists associated with intersectionality are Kimberly Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins.
7. Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 11.
8. This was the view that African Americans constitute a nation with the “right of self-determination” in regions of the Deep South where they were a majority.
9. Marxists have traditionally distinguished the Soviet social and economic system from the totalitarianism of fascism, although the violence and political repression can seem similar. Of course, the exact figures for Stalin’s victims are wildly in dispute, since it is can be difficult to separate the number of deaths intentionally inflicted from unavoidable collateral damage, not to mention murders for which Stalin can be held directly accountable as distinct from the crimes initiated by henchmen in his regime. However, even the major revisionist scholar in Soviet studies, J. Arch Getty, acknowledges that “From 1921 to Stalin’s death, in 1953, around 800,000 people were sentenced to death and shot, 85 percent of them in the years of the Great Terror of 1937-1938. From 1934 to Stalin’s death, more than a million perished in the gulag camps. A few years ago these figures were confirmed by KGB archivists and published in the Yeltsin Administration’s official gazetteer.” See J. Arch Getty, “The Future Did Not Work,” *Atlantic Monthly* 285, no. 3 (March 2000): 113-166, available on line at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/03/getty.htm>. For a much higher figure by a leading historian, see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment: 40th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
10. Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 129. Higashida mentions the opposition to “Double V” in passing as a flaw attributed to Earl Browder, but Gore gives the impression that the Party supported it.
11. Dayo Gore, 87-88.
12. McDuffie, 190.
13. The Spanish Communist Ibárruri was an archetypal figure of the Comintern, blending heroic anti-fascism with a whole-hearted collaboration in murderous Soviet repression. She should be understood as one of those people who combined powerful commitment with terrible errors, morally and politically correct on many key issues but wrong on others — often at the same time. All that Jackson has to say about her in 2002 is that “She was a leader...of women. She was the revolution.” See McDuffie, 101.
14. McDuffie, 217-18.
15. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, 57.
16. Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 9.
17. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, xi.
18. Stuart Hall, “The Life and Times of the First New Left,” *New Left Review* 61 (January-February 2010), available at: <http://newleftreview.org/11/61/stuart-hall-life-and-times-of-the-first-new-left>.
19. See Alex Callinicos, “Daniel Bensaid and the Broken Time of Marxism,” *International Socialism* 135, available at: <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=828&issue=135>.
20. Higashida, 178.
21. The names of anti-Stalinist Marxist male writers addressing U.S. racism and colonialism are well known — C. L. R. James, James Boggs, Conrad Lynn, George Breitman and Sidney Lens — and much useful information can be found in C. L. R. James, George Breitman, and Edgar Keemer, *Fighting Racism in World War II* (New York: Monad Press, 1982) and Christopher Phelps, *Race and Revolution* (London: Verso, 2003). But the local history approach exemplified by Gore and McDuffie has been rarely invoked. It should be applied to specific sites, such as the Detroit branch of the Socialist Workers Party during the 1940s, which attracted a substantial number of African Americans. Many nearly-forgotten Black Marxist cadres were trained, such as Ernie Dillard (“Ernie Drake”), Jessie Dillard and Edgar Keemer, as well as notable proletarian militants more briefly in the organization such as Horace Sheffield. One important effort in the direction of such local history is Joe Allen, *People Wasn’t Made to Burn* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011).