

Radical Americas

Book review: Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*

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Book Review

Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 280pp, £20.00 / \$24.95.

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Robyn C. Spencer's politically timely and eminently engaging history of the Black Panther Party (BPP) is a must read for anyone interested in Black Power and the history of the African American freedom struggle more broadly. Published on the fiftieth anniversary of the BPP's founding, *The Revolution Has Come* breaks new ground by presenting a wealth of original source material that sheds new light on the organizational development and the ideological outlook of the Panthers in Oakland.

The book is structured chronologically, covering the emergence of the Panthers within the broader context of Black Power, the development of the local organization into a mass movement following the 'Free Huey' campaign, their later move into electoral politics and the demise of the Party in the late 1970s to early 1980s. In-depth interviews with former members are a key feature of the study and offer new and fascinating insights into the organizing activities and experiences of individual Panthers. While Spencer has interviewed leading BPP figures such as Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown, lesser known activists such as Bobby Bowen, Amar Casey, Sherwin Forte and Brenda Presley also feature throughout. This is central to the realization of the author's self-stated aim to move beyond accounts that focus solely on the Panthers' charismatic male leadership and to instead document the vital

grassroots work that was central to the organization's development. I was particularly taken with the way in which Spencer lets these historical actors speak for themselves – quoting at length from these interviews in such a way that provides additional insight into the dedication, emotional work and the frustrations that were central to their struggle against institutionalized white supremacy.

Throughout the book, Spencer makes telling observations regarding the Southern origins of the Black Panther Party, the role of black women as key organizers and intellectual figures within the Party and the internationalist and anti-imperialist outlook of the Panthers, as well as the extent and personal effects of state repression on the BPP. The result is a complex and nuanced account of the organization that reminds us that the Black Panther Party was a multifaceted and pragmatic group that achieved a huge amount in what amounted to incredibly testing circumstances.

Significantly, *The Revolution Has Come* centres the relationship between state repression and the role of women within the BPP. The book expertly traces the staggering levels to which the state – from local law enforcement to the FBI – monitored and worked to disrupt the organization's activities. As Spencer states, being a Panther was 'tantamount to being a target' (p.66). While other historical studies have accounted for the impact that state repression had on the demise of the Panthers, the study is notable for its vivid documentation of what it was personally like for activists facing the day-to-day reality of state-sponsored harassment. The book also clearly shows the incredible levels of perseverance and flexibility exhibited by Party members as they responded to attempts to drain the organization of resources and morale. Crucially, Spencer examines both the gendered effects that state repression had on women within the Party and how they responded to these disruptive influences. She shows how it was often black women who held the Panthers together in times of crisis and how, in the process, they challenged chauvinistic tendencies within the Party. While the book doesn't offer a particularly close analysis of the gendered ideology of the Panthers, Spencer does justice to the central role black women such as Ericka Huggins, Joan Kelley and Janice Garrett-Forte played in shaping the organization throughout its existence. The book shines a light on the extent to which, whether by formulating policy, producing literature, running community programmes or standing for office, black women were often the driving force behind the organizational and intellectual development of the Panthers. As Spencer asserts: 'black women in Oakland boldly cast themselves in the image of a Black

Panther' (p.37). Chapter Six is particularly significant in this regard, as Spencer examines Elaine Brown's resuscitation of the Party during Huey Newton's exile in Cuba between 1974 and 1977. It is telling that Spencer leaves the reader with the impression that Newton's return and Brown's subsequent resignation finally spelled the end for the Panthers.

When reflecting on the publication of her book in an interview with the African American Intellectual History Society, Spencer stated: 'I wanted to write in a way that reflected scholarly rigor but was still legible to the people in the working-class communities I came from'. *The Revolution Has Come* categorically succeeds on both fronts. Engagingly written and clearly structured, this study offers new insights for academics, activists and the general reader alike. As a new generation of activists are fighting against police brutality, mass incarceration and economic inequality, this book represents a much-needed return to the history of radical activism that expanded the struggle for civil rights into a politically diverse demand for human rights for black Americans. The book will surely attract a wide and diverse audience as activists continue to consider and act upon many of the issues that the Panthers confronted in the 1960s and 1970s. As Spencer makes clear, 'The solutions the Panthers sought, such as community control of the police, freedom for political prisoners, and an end to poverty and war, remain central in many struggles for justice today' (p.3).

Note

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