

Spencer, Robyn C. (2016) *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta (2016) *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, Il.

Review by Scott Henkel

It is quite welcome to see a gifted writer using her talents to build from the lessons of a past political movement or focusing her critical attention on a contemporary movement. Considering the poverty of current affairs in the United States, intellectual work that is embedded in the politics of mass movements, committed both to theorizing and to achieving a better world, is a high point in an otherwise low time.

For those reasons, it was remarkable to read Robyn C. Spencer's book *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* together with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. These writers deliver prose that is at times breathtaking and heartbreaking, and their books display a willingness both to criticize where necessary and to propose ideas and pathways that may be fruitful to follow. Spencer and Taylor make historical and theoretical contributions and they succeed in negotiating the careful balance that will make their books valuable to both academic and activist audiences.

The Revolution Has Come is the first book-length history of the Black Panther Party's Oakland chapter—which is in itself a contribution to the scholarship on the movement, given that Oakland is the BPP's birthplace and, after 1971, in response to severe state repression, the city in which many of its national activists congregated. Spencer's book complicates many of the myths about the BPP—of these, its masculinity and its position on armed self defense are among the most insightful.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation is among the foremost contributions to our contemporary anti-racist movements. Taylor takes on a range of issues that the Movement for Black Lives has placed on center stage: the ever-growing number of black lives that are ended by the hands and arms of the police; why the movement erupted while the country's first black president held office, and significantly, why it has such prominence in Baltimore, a city with a majority black government; how the discourse of so-called colorblindness masks contemporary racism; and, like Spencer, how issues of race and gender intersect issues of class. As Taylor writes,

‘the American working class is female, immigrant, Black, white, Latino/a, and more. Immigrant issues, gender issues, and antiracism *are* working class issues’ (216, emphasis in original).

Reading these two books together presents a picture of how a movement adapts in response to its situation and also, in a longer historical sense, how the movements of one generation put to use the lessons learned in previous generations. After reading these books, it is difficult to see either the Black Panther Party or the Movement for Black Lives as singular, static entities; while the critique of racism, capitalism, and sexism makes the groups cohere, the books show at length how activists adapt to their situations and how much both movements learned from their predecessors, changing tactics or taking new directions as necessary. Spencer shows, for example, that women in the BPP not only stepped into leadership positions when the state focused its repression on Panther men, but seized that opportunity because they were doing that work already.

Among the most nuanced analyses of *The Revolution Has Come* is the way Spencer acknowledges the gravitational pull that leaders like Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had on the BPP, but also emphasizes the fact that much of the substantive leadership for the movement came from women, notably Kathleen Cleaver, Connie Matthews, and also Elaine Brown, who led the group through the mid-1970s. Spencer charts how the BPP developed from the spectacular activities of armed self defense and police monitoring to the substance of what the party called ‘community survival programs’, which included giving free breakfast to schoolchildren, and also giving away thousands of bags of groceries, free rides to senior citizens, free sickle cell anemia tests, as well as running a free elementary school, bus services, a health clinic, and an ambulance service. Spencer calls these the ‘lynchpin of the Party’s new vision in this era’ (117); she writes that as ‘Panther tactics and strategies shifted, so did their inner organizational structure. They had moved from being an organization that applauded revolutionary action against the police to an organization that emphasized day-to-day work’ (132). It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this work and the profound improvement that clothes, food, safety, and schools meant to the people the BPP served. An organization that feeds the body and the mind—especially for people who have been systematically, structurally deprived of these things—proves, as Spencer highlights, that revolution is a process and that a revolutionary organization will face hostility from a classist, racist, sexist state for many reasons, the most obvious of which is that such an organization will make that state look morally bankrupt in comparison.

Whereas the Panthers became more centralized over the years that Spencer documents and its problems of leadership grew more pronounced, the Movement for Black Lives is purposefully decentralized—it seems impossible ever to expect it to become centralized without some drastic change in the movement’s character. As Taylor writes, the ‘political uprisings of the 1960s, fueled by the Black insurgency, transformed American politics, including Americans’ basic understanding of the relationship between Black poverty and institutional racism—and, for some, capitalism. Ideas are fluid, but it usually takes political action to set them in motion—and stasis for the retreat to set in’ (50). Ideas are indeed fluid, and it is fascinating to see how, for example, charismatic leadership seemed vital to the Panthers, but now seems like a detriment to the Movement for Black Lives. Taylor notes how #BLM has reinvigorated the commitment to leaderlessness that the Occupy movement espoused, putting it into substantive practice, but also complicating it where necessary (168, 176). The Movement for Black Lives has self-consciously decentered its leadership not only because of the catastrophic effects to a leader-centered

movement when that leader is killed, compromised, or jailed, but it has also built beyond the Occupy movement. Leaderlessness may inoculate a movement from the pitfalls of vanguardism and personality cults, but it also raises problems in turn, like the difficulty for new participants to negotiate unspoken or informal rules (Taylor 145-48; 175-6). Similarly, she notes how a new generation of activists often brings a ‘new vitality to the patterns and rhythms of activism’ yet also that there exists much continuity between the current generation of activists and previous generations (162). ‘The tactical and strategic flexibility of the youth activists’, Taylor writes, ‘flowed from a developing politics that could not be constrained by a narrow agenda of voter registration or a simple electoral strategy. In Ferguson, these emerging politics were embodied by the emergence of young Black women as a central organizing force’ (163).

Regarding the political action that sets ideas in motion, Spencer and Taylor reflect on some of the most enduring questions about organizational form, about the sources from which a movement derives its power, and about the obstacles that movements generally face. While these books are specifically situated to address their particular movements, the likelihood that other similar organizations could draw inspiration from these studies is high.

The value of these books is manifold, and much of that value derives from the fact that both authors take an unflinching look at the problems we face. Consider a particularly powerful moment from Taylor:

The aspiration for Black liberation cannot be separated from what happens in the United States as a whole. Black life cannot be transformed while the rest of the country burns. The fires consuming the United States are stoked by the widespread alienation of low-wage and meaningless work, unaffordable rents, suffocating debt, and poverty. The essence of economic inequality is born out in a simple fact: there are 400 billionaires in the United States and 45 million people living in poverty. These are not parallel facts; they are intersecting facts. There are 400 American billionaires *because* there are 45 million people living in poverty. Profit comes at the expense of the living wage. [...] The struggle for Black liberation, then, is not an abstract idea molded in isolation from the wider phenomenon of economic exploitation and inequality that pervades all of American society; it is intimately bound up with them. (193–4, emphasis in original)

In Malcolm X’s phrase, the effort to say it plain to anyone willing to listen, to face the issues of the day and the obstacles to collective liberation without trepidation, in collaboration with mass political movements, is as rare as it is valuable. Spencer and Taylor make that effort successfully and admirably; their books deserve a wide audience.

Reviewer Bio

Scott Henkel is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies at the University of Wyoming. He is the author of *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*, published in the Caribbean Studies series of the University Press of Mississippi. He is a member of the Steering Committee of the Working-Class Studies Association.