

Black Nations/Black Nationalisms: Comment on Stephens and Introduction to the Dossier of Book Reviews

In “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,” Ronald Stephens asks readers to recall the life of Robert F. Williams, an underappreciated race rebel, whose transnational life still offers critical lessons to anti-racist scholars and activists in the twenty-first century. Stephens works to expand the literature on Black internationalism and on Williams in particular by narrating the dilemmas Williams encountered both in the U.S. South and in Cuba, where high hopes about the Revolution’s erasure of racism were eventually disappointed.

Stephens does not flinch from describing Williams’s struggles against entrenched White racism in Cuba, nor his conflict with the communist party in the United States, which extended into his time in Cuba and later communist China. Stephens recalls Williams’s patriotic service as a marine in the Korean War and his hopes for reform via the NAACP chapter in his home county of Monroe when he returned. Williams’s recruitment of fellow veterans and other working-class young men to the NAACP allowed him to facilitate an unusual cross-fertilization of the NAACP with the NRA, a helpful exposition of his route to an emphasis on self-defense symbolized by the gun imagery that was his trademark. I argue that locating Williams in the conventional political chart of left and right is a delicate venture. Further nuance emerges from the distinctly Christian charge of “The Crusader,” the newsletter Williams published with his wife Mabel (a person whose story cries out for a narrator of its own), along with his sympathy for leftist movements—from the Progressive Labor Party to existing socialist governments.

The tensions and contradictions in Williams’s life make him a slippery subject for study. Stephens reveals this tension in the language of his essay, which ventures into paradox or ambiguity to capture Williams’s personal incongruity. One fascinating tension emerges when Stephens suggests that Williams sought to use armed resistance as “an ideological tactic.” Removing armed resistance from the material sphere in which it usually rests and placing it instead in the ideological realm, Stephens rhetorically merges the two. He thereby resists the distinction between tactics and strategies that De Certeau draws in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, agreeing instead with Maria Lugones’s sharp diagnosis of the politics of that distinction via “the spatiality of theory.”¹ Calling an ideological move a “tactic,” Stephens proffers a pointed conflation, awarding Williams’s infamous pragmatism the status of ideology, of theory.

Stephens continues to highlight the contradictions of Williams’s life by following the twists and turns of his repeated forays and retreats. Confronted with the frustrations of his hopes at several turns, Williams was compelled to face the bankruptcy of radical projects in which he had yearned to place his faith. There can be no consistency in such a life. Tellingly, Stephens paints Williams as “forced into a self-imposed exile,” a description that ought to be a contradiction in terms, but that for Williams, alas, was not.

In his last paragraph, and almost without comment, Stephens closes with the fascinatingly inconclusive end of Williams’s chaptered life. Returning from exile, Williams accepted a Ford Foundation fellowship to the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan and assisted Kissinger’s advisor on the eve of the Secretary of State’s first trip to China. It is fascinating to contemplate the shifts Williams must have undergone in order to engineer and accept this resolution with big business, a major state academic institution, and the U.S. government.

¹ Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, chapter 10, on “the spatiality of theory.”

Perhaps Williams prefigured that move with the phrase that serves as Stephens's title. "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition" was Williams's response to a query about the role of religion in the Cuban revolution, apparently defending Castro's band. Although Stephens does not focus at length on how U.S. nationalism and Christianity swirled into Williams's radical, anti-imperialist dissent, this quotation forces the reader to face the complex mix. Williams clearly intended to counter an implicit charge of atheism, a veiled accusation within many condemnations of communism. The now-ringing trope that he selected has its storied origin in World War II, supposedly the response of a chaplain taking up a gunner's position alongside his ministry subjects reacting to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That Williams polished this gem of U.S. nationalism, popularized in a song that repeatedly topped the charts, shows the conventions he accepted even as he resisted so many others.² Of course no individual could hope to be free from the contexts of their subject-formation nor should any academic biographer hope them to be; to Stephens's credit, he does not shrink from recognizing the complexity of his wonderfully unpredictable subject.

In perhaps the most banal and therefore most surprising move of his life, Williams retired to a small town in Michigan after his year at the university, remaining there for twenty-seven years before his death in 1996.³ From a highly visible life on the front lines of struggle and in conflict with any entity that deviated from his stalwart principled stance, Williams moved to a sleepy backwater far from the public eye. This is an intriguing piece in a puzzle whose other patterns have been far more compelling to observers. What might this tell us of local activism, solidarities enacted in practice and in space, and the returning importance of place?

Stephens is just the person to tell us about this phase of Williams's life, as a scholar of American cities and towns, particularly another small Michigan town, the African-American vacation destination of Idlewild. His forthcoming work on Robert F. Williams will hopefully bring together these two arenas of expertise to cast light on this still-shadowy period of Williams's fruitful life.

Another suggestive path Stephens will hopefully pursue in his larger work on Williams involves a coincidence of dates. It is fascinating that Williams rejected non-violence the year Castro's rebels took Havana. Surely Williams knew of this inspiring victory. It would have been difficult for him to avoid encountering the news, given its nationwide coverage in the United States and the intense interest in African-American communities in decolonizing struggles throughout Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Indeed, as Stephens reminds us, Williams himself was involved in at least one of the organizations dedicated to pursuing that interest and its possible fruition in collaboration: the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, or FPCC. Stephens also confirms that Williams had been in contact with Castro prior to travelling to Cuba in 1961, in part via three trips before his exile. Stephens does not explore this question, but his essay prompts readers to wonder about the role of the Cuban Revolution in the evolution of Williams's thinking about armed resistance and revolt. What role might this Latin American revolution have played in this important site of Black radical thinking in the United States? The

² Frank Loesser, "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," Famous Music Corp., 1942.

³ Timothy B. Tyson, "Introduction: Robert F. Williams and the African American Freedom Struggles," in Timothy B. Tyson (ed.), *The Black Power Movement. Part 2, The Papers of Robert F. Williams* [microform]. Ann Arbor: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 2002, xvi; online at <http://www.roosevelt.nl/Content/RSC/docs/Finding%20Aids%20Primary%20Sources/Civil%20Rights%20and%20Minorities/Black%20Power%20Movement%20Papers%20of%20Robert%20F.%20Williams.pdf> (Accessed 8/6/10).

coincidence is too compelling to avoid, and the lesson of this vector of “influence” flowing not from but to American subjects, too important a corrective to U.S. ethnocentrism.

Here lies the kernel of the fruitful lessons Williams continues to offer contemporary readers: an illustration of the flux and flow of encounter and the ever-changing nature of affinity and imagined community. Williams’s travels followed the magnetic appeals and disappointments of crisscrossing transnational solidarities: the communist party in the United States, Cuba, and the U.S.S.R.; anti-racist solidarity in China, Cuba, and the U.S. South; anti-imperialism in Cuba, African America, and Africa; and White supremacy in Cuba and the United States (particularly the South). It ends with the astonishing turn of Williams’s loan of his services to the U.S. government and subsequent retreat to loyal, small-town America.

As a result of all these permutations, Williams’s nationalism was a many-splendored thing, fluid and shifting over the course of his life as he moved through different landscapes of antagonism and coalition. If in relation to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he stepped into the most caricatured performance of gun-toting radical, in relation to Cuban revolutionaries he stood in proud anti-imperialist egalitarianism. Williams pushes scholars to reconsider nationalism as a flexible, dynamic philosophy of practical solidarity rather than a dogmatic essentialism often rendered as summary dismissal. Stephens’s direction to return to the life of Robert F. Williams is equally a demand that critics revisit the concept of Black nationalism, recognize its functional distinction from U.S. nationalism, and refuse its relegation to anachronism.

The works that constitute the next portion of this special issue of the *Black Diaspora Review* move us another meaningful step towards such a project. Student-authored, they are vibrant, sharp-eyed, and unjaded. They review a handful of books on Black nationalisms, a collection of great depth and breadth in every dimension. The books under review take up subjects including the racialization of space, the sexual politics of rap music, the pressures and tensions within Black solidarity as revealed in responses to AIDS, Afro-Trinidadian cultural politics under U.S. occupation, the class politics of competing nationalisms in Jamaica, the cultural politics of class and nationalism in post-independence Guyana, an 1835 slave revolt in Bahia, the Black Arts movement, and Black Power in Newark. In geography they range from Trinidad, Jamaica, the Anglophone Caribbean as a region, Guyana, and Brazil, to Canada and the United States. The works reviewed, published within a span of two decades from 1991 to 2007, treat periods throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with forays into the twenty-first. In method they stray from ethnography of the marginal to interviews with political elites to highly theoretical problematizations of space, mining sources culled from historical archives, the collective memory embodied in ritual, literature, popular and erudite art, music, dance, performance, scholarship, and material culture.

The lessons of these works, as varied as they are in form and content, underline the lessons of Robert F. Williams’s life regarding Black nationalism. They feature multiple axes of (Black) identification: solidarities of kin, the African nation in captivity, gender, region, religion, politics, and class, structured and fissured by the other axes in competition or collage. They leave little room for dogmatic definitions of nationalism along a single axis, showing instead the powerful desires human beings so often evince for just, reciprocal, egalitarian relations to each other. Although the solidarities these books evoke often align along “race,” this category itself is a changeling, shifting over time and place, showing primarily the organizing power of categories built, contested, and ever-rebuilt by human agency.

It is hardly surprising that the authors of these book reviews—Maria Hamilton Abegunde, Malaika Baxa, Katie Dieter, Caralee Jones, Roberta Radovich, Shana Riddick, and

Carmen Williams—are all students who have chosen to pursue graduate work in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University, whose faculty literally embody the extant range of relation to nationalism and to the 1960s and 1970s. There are those who were or nearly were contemporaries of Robert F. Williams or Amiri Baraka, who extend their legacies with Black-focused politics and scholarship aimed at full African-American citizenship, and others who stand gratefully on their shoulders to further the struggle in other arenas, via work to explode conventions of gender and sexuality, for example, or to break down the walls of the prison system, that brutally effective instrument of frustration of civil rights gains. They are gathered under a deliberately expanded banner—the department’s name was changed from “African-American Studies” in 2001—and with an explicit intent to expand the notion of the field geographically, for example in the recent hiring of two Latin Americanists.

The book reviews that follow reveal some of the insights generated from within such a capacious definition of the field. They were written for a readings seminar I taught in the fall of 2009, and in my eyes they are rich in exposition and profound in thought. The students crafted beautiful treatments of a monographic motley crew, as confoundingly interdisciplinary as one could dream of inflicting through the methods course that was their mode of introduction. The reviews insist on contextualizing each work on its own disciplinary turf and evaluating the author’s intended intervention rather than imposing the reviewer’s own research priorities or the projects of their day. They do not expect the works to cover all social categories or to be any one thing to all people; they look instead for the idiosyncratic and therefore valuable pieces of each phenomenon in question and of the books the authors have rendered as result. Their approach is one that recognizes the richness of the field of African Diaspora Studies, animated by the varied panoply of scholars who contribute to its endeavors.

In their own evolving scholarship, the authors of these book reviews assume some of the insights developed by activists such as Williams and scholars such as Stephens. They are hopeful and excited, and they are smart. Their intellectual, artistic, and activist labors will write the next chapters in the stories recounted in the books they review. Seven authors will define at least as many individual directions. All will take their place in the field Robert F. Williams dared to dream. Look out for them.

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