

## **The Impact of McCarthyism on the African American Freedom Movement, Revisted**

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**Abstract:**

This collection of essays edited by U.S. historians Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang is an important contribution to the growing field of 'revisionist' historiography, which deals with 1950s U.S. culture and a renewed understanding of the early Cold War, anti-communism and its relation to the African American fight for racial progress. The six essays focusing on little-known aspects of 1950s black radical activism argue for the destructive impact which McCarthyism had on the African American movement for racial equality. They thereby ultimately challenge and complicate the historiographical notion that the Cold War was beneficial to the success of the black freedom movement.

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In the last few years, the historiography of the 1950s and the early Cold War has undergone a striking transformation, opening whole new fields of inquiry. A particularly productive area of this historiographical 'revision' has been the relation of African Americans and their struggle for racial equality to 1950s anticommunist repression and McCarthyism. The collection *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: 'Another Side of the Story'*, edited by historians Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, is a significant contribution to this growing field of scholarship. As its subtitle suggests, it aims to tell "another side of the story": the destructive impact which McCarthyism had on the African American freedom struggle, emphasizing the discontinuities and ruptures it caused in the (long) African American civil rights movement. It thereby fruitfully "intervene[s]" in and "bring[s] together" the historiographical debates of both the "black freedom movement" and that of "U.S. anticommunism" (p. 2).

Robbie Lieberman's contribution, for example, examines the intersection of the African American freedom struggle with the post-World War II peace movement. She highlights this connection paradigmatically by focusing on the neglected contributions of African American journalist Eugene Gordon and playwright Lorraine Hansberry, arguing that such a perspective will decisively provide a "fuller understanding of the import of the suppression of the Black Left" (p. 19). In this regard, it is her discussion of Hansberry's peace work which is particularly fascinating. It adds an important dimension to the cultural legacy of Hansberry, an acclaimed playwright whose 1959 Broadway play *A Raisin In the Sun* is regarded as one of the most pivotal contributions to African American 20th century drama, but whose legacy oftentimes excludes her political radicalism and post-World War II commitment to peace – an oversight which Lieberman takes pains to address.

Similarly, Erik McDuffie's chapter highlights the as yet neglected role of radical Communist activist Esther Cooper Jackson in the black freedom struggle and her fight against anticommunist repression, seeking to "illuminate the poorly studied political and personal costs of McCarthyism on black women radicals" (p. 82). McDuffie outlines how Cooper Jackson's "black left feminism" came under attack during McCarthyism, leading her, in defending her

indicted husband James Jackson, to rely on strategies of “familialism.” This, McDuffie convincingly argues, led to the appropriation of discourses of “conservative postwar domesticity” which served, on the one hand, as a crucial strategy of resistance to anticommunist repression but, on the other, “stood in stark contrast to the transgressive gender politics that [...] [black left feminists such as Cooper Jackson] often practiced prior to the early 1950s” (p. 84).

In giving “another side of the story”, the volume is able to achieve the goal formulated in the introduction and coherently emphasises the multidimensional, destructive impact of McCarthyism on the African American freedom struggle and the ruptures it caused, hence complicating notions of a continuous ‘long’ civil rights movement. Its six contributions trace this repression on a ‘grassroots’ level by focusing on individuals such as Gordon, Hansberry and Cooper Jackson and by accentuating, moreover, the impact of McCarthyism on labor organisations such as The National Negro Labor Council (Clarence Lang), on newspapers such as *Correspondence* (Rachel Peterson) and on organisational networks associated with the American Labor Party (Jacqueline Castledine). Zaragosa Vargas’s chapter on “The Mexican American Fight for Social and Economic Justice, 1946-1963” extends the focus on the Mexican American civil rights movement and its relation to McCarthyism as well as on its intersection to the African American struggle. As it does make some strong points of connection between these two struggles for economic and racial equality, one can only hope that the excellent essay receives the attention it deserves in-between essays with a decisive focus on anticommunism and the ‘African American’ freedom movement.

Lieberman’s and Lang’s edition proves to be an innovative addition to the historiographical ‘revisionist’ literature of the early Cold War and convincingly illuminates the repressive role which McCarthyism played on the black freedom struggle by excavating and recovering seemingly lost stories of a black radical activist tradition. One hopes it will therefore inspire and stimulate much more scholarship on related subject matter.