



# The Black Scholar

Journal of Black Studies and Research

ISSN: 0006-4246 (Print) 2162-5387 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtbs20>

## Book Reviews

Joy James, John Woodford & Michael Nash

To cite this article: Joy James, John Woodford & Michael Nash (2002) Book Reviews, *The Black Scholar*, 32:1, 52-57, DOI: [10.1080/00064246.2002.11431170](https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2002.11431170)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2002.11431170>



Published online: 14 Apr 2015.



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# THE BLACKSCHOLAR

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**THE MORNING BREAKS: THE TRIAL OF ANGELA DAVIS**, by Bettina Aptheker. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 294 pp., \$16.95, paper. *Reviewed by Joy James*

OFTEN, CONVENTIONAL ACCOUNTS of democratic struggle sweep the most violent and unsavory aspects of U.S. history under the rug. At times, though, important works that deepen our understanding of contemporary battles for social justice in the United States surface. Providing a corrective to political amnesia, Bettina Aptheker offers a provocative and incisive narrative in *The Morning Breaks*.

Aptheker and Angela Davis are professors at the University of California at Santa Cruz, respectively in the Women's Studies and History of Consciousness programs. They became friends in the 1950s as teenage activists in New York. As young intellectuals and radicals, they reconnected a decade later during the dangerous years in which reactionaries, police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) targeted radicals. Aptheker's book gives a brilliant account of these antidemocratic elements in U.S. society. Combining personal testimony, historical documentation of battles against racist violence, and nuanced descriptions of the lives of prisoner leaders terrorized by guards, she highlights political figures and circumstances often diminished in hazy memory.

*The Morning Breaks* remained out of print until this year, when it was reissued by Cornell University Press, with a new introduction and afterword. The first edition was published by International Publishers in 1975, one year after Random House, under the guidance of Davis's editor at the time, Toni Morrison, released *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. Davis's autobiography introduced many to the events that led to her political incarceration and development as an influential social critic. *The Morning Breaks*, though, provides a narrative with a richly detailed context about the trial not found in Davis's memoir (which also focuses on her childhood and youth). It relates specific events leading up to the trial and the trial itself amid an international struggle to free a woman, who would become in the 1970s, the most prominent political prisoner in the United States.

THERE ARE MANY INTERESTING STORIES woven into *The Morning Breaks*. Aptheker recalls the adverse impact the trial had on her family. (Just as Davis had seen her UCLA contract as an Assistant Professor in philosophy terminated because of her open membership in the Communist Party, Aptheker's then-husband Jack Kurzweil would be denied tenure at San Francisco State because of the couple's highly visible role in Davis's defense team—a court later reversed the termination). There are accounts of courage, venality, tragedy and eventually triumph surrounding one of the most massive and successful campaigns in twentieth-century radicalism. The book documents the complex activism and analyses of women and men who helped to create the conditions for a fair trial. (In the thirteen photographs reproduced, readers will see the faces of some of the most effective, daring and desperate organizers of that era.)

Covering more than the trial itself, *The Morning Breaks* critiques the racism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, black liberation, and the roles of black, chicana, and white women in challenging state violence and repression. Aptheker relates her own story as an antiracist white feminist along with the stories of activists Kendra and Franklin Alexander, Victoria Mercado and jury forewoman Mary M. Timothy who would later befriend her—the book is dedicated to their memory—as well as Fania Davis and Sallye B. Davis, respectively sister and mother of the defendant, attorney Margaret Burnham (a childhood friend of both Aptheker's and Davis's, currently a professor at MIT) and Charlene Mitchell, the former CPUSA leader who moved to California to coordinate the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis.

THE PROLOGUE RELATES HOW DAVIS, while defending her right to teach at UCLA, began working in a mass defense for the Soledad Brothers—George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette—African-American leaders in the California prisoners' rights movement who were charged in January 1970 with killing a guard by prison officials attempting to destroy their movement. Through the Soledad Brothers' Defense Committee, Davis became close to George Jack-

son's mother Georgina and younger brother Jonathan. She would eventually meet and become the intimate of George Jackson.

In August 1970, out of concern for the safety of his older brother, and seeking to publicize state abuses against the Soledad Brothers and dehumanizing prison conditions, Jonathan attempted to free from a Marin County Courthouse three prisoners—William Christmas, James McClain and Ruchell Magee—African American men who had been tortured and threatened by guards for reporting guard brutality. Jonathan Jackson had access to the home in which Angela Davis's guns were stored (Davis had received death threats and had legally purchased weapons for protection). He carried weapons registered in her name into the Marin County courtroom, arming McClain, Christmas, and Magee. The four took as hostages Judge Harold Haley, his son-in-law and prosecutor Gary Thomas and other jurors, and retreated to a van in the parking lot. San Quentin guards fired on the parked vehicle—standard California prison policy was for guards to prevent escapes regardless of the consequences—killing Haley, Jackson, McClain, Christmas and seriously wounding Thomas and Magee.

Although she was not in northern California at the time, because the guns were registered in her name, and more importantly because she had been targeted for her political activities, Davis was designated as an accomplice. Maintaining that she did not know of Jackson's plans, Davis went underground, initiating one of the largest "man-hunts" in U.S. history. She was listed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List until her capture in Manhattan several months later and her subsequent extradition to California to stand trial on charges of murder, conspiracy, and kidnapping.

**A**PTHEKER DOES A THOROUGH JOB of explaining the government's sometimes deadly repression of radicals and the immense difficulties in securing just trials for radicals: Prior to the June 1970 tragedy, the National Guard had killed unarmed students at Kent State, while the FBI's illegal counterintelligence program, COINTEL-PRO, created a covert policy of police executions and the framing of black revolutionaries.

Notwithstanding the book's subtitle, its detailed documentation in two chapters, "The Fight for Bail" and "The Trial," describes how the political drama unfolded both inside and outside of the courtroom. Davis spent sixteen months in jail, mostly in solitary confinement. During that time her attorneys and defense team worked feverishly to get her released on bail: Her health was deteriorating and the mainstream media considered her incarceration as proof of her guilt.

Given that the death penalty had not been abolished at the time of her imprisonment—California Governor Ronald Reagan was actively campaigning for her execution—the fight for Davis's release was painfully intense. Aptheker relays much of the tortuous struggle. With the (temporary) abolition of California's death penalty, Davis was released in 1971. Progressives had faced tremendous opposition from the police, courts, and media but garnered support from diverse sources. Aptheker informs us that Davis's acquittal was partly, if not largely, won outside of the courtroom and depended upon the mobilization of local coalitions and mass, international protest.

Aptheker describes how, over the defense team's strenuous objections, the prosecutor Albert Harris introduced Davis's prison love letters to Jackson; the letters were taken from Jackson's cell after he was executed by a prison guard in 1971. Reading the letters (a mixture of political theory and self-reflection) to the jury, the state presented Davis as a woman "crazed" with frustrated passion. Aptheker writes how Harris was forced to abandon a political argument and "shrouded" Davis in racial-sexual stereotypes.

Harris . . . had intended to argue that Angela, driven by a political fanaticism (as evidenced by her speeches) and an irresistible passion (as evidenced by her June 1970 letters to George Jackson) had committed herself to this reckless criminal enterprise.

By the time the case finally came to trial, however, the political situation in the country had changed. In the wake of the Attica Uprising [the 1971 prison revolt sparked by Jackson's assassination] especially, there was a growing popular awareness of the racism and brutality of the prison system. Angela's early denunciations might now seem not only reasonable and just, but prophetic. (166)

**A**NGELA DAVIS WAS ACQUITTED on June 4, 1972, months after the surviving Soledad Brothers and their supporters relished their own exonerations in court and nearly two years after an exhaustive, nerve-wracking campaign to free her. Aptheker writes "In the wake of the worldwide movement to free Angela, millions of people were made aware of prison conditions in the United States." Through Davis's case, many learned of the denial of basic rights to prisoners. Aptheker views Davis's vindication as one of the infrequent "people's victories." Detailing how the acquittal was predicated on a vigilant and active citizenry, Aptheker's new introduction suggests that such activism has not been mobilized today for the tens of thousands imprisoned in California, who, she

observes, are mostly men of color. Against racial bias and its impact on U.S. prisons—with the Thirteenth Amendment legalizing slavery for prisoners, the United States has the highest incarceration and execution rates in the industrialized world, Aptheker makes the following argument:

As long as white people, in their majority, see racism as either a minor inconvenience or the figment of a colored imagination, we are all complicit in its worst excesses. In this sense, too, we were all responsible for Jonathan Jackson's actions, and we are responsible for the revolts and uprisings that continue to erupt. Those of us who are white know that if we lived under these same conditions, and if our families had lived under them for generations, we too would rise up. Until these conditions are changed, until white people in overwhelming numbers join with people of color to rise up against racism, this terrible suffering cannot be ended, and these wounds cannot be healed (xx).

Offering a testimonial for the casualties and survivors of a turbulent era, Bettina Aptheker's critical history of one important trial demonstrates how invaluable some victories remain for democratic struggles.

**"ALWAYS BRING A CROWD!": THE STORY OF FRANK LUMPKIN, STEELWORKER**, by Beatrice Lumpkin, (New York: International Publishers Co., 1999), paper, \$12.95. *Reviewed by John Woodford*

THIS IS THE STORY of an extraordinary "common man." Sounds like a logical impossibility, doesn't it? But in *Always Bring a Crowd*, the story of steelworker Frank Lumpkin, you will meet such a man, a hero for our times. You will read a life story that emerges from the blast furnace of American history—the part of American history that is generally shielded from our eyes. (And speaking of shielding, if the AFL-CIO does not promote and mass-produce this book, it is not serious about gaining strength in American politics.)

In these days of wealth and luxury for a few, we all see the decline of our cities, farms, industrial base, schools, health care system and pensions. Our mass media, our public intellectuals, our politicians wring their hands and say, Too bad, but there is no way to counter the "global" and "high-tech" forces sending the majority of us on this pell-mell descent in a handbasket bound for economic hell. Or they say, Just be patient and await the "trickle down." Or they ignore the growing numbers of poorly paid and insecure salary and wage workers and say, That's just the way things are.

Yet here stands the example of Frank Lumpkin. His life story shows us how to get out of the handbasket and start building up a better society. It will take union power. No other social force has its potential influence. Lumpkin demonstrated this in the campaign he's best known for in the Chicago area—the 17-year fight that prevented a giant steel firm and its holding companies from cheating 2,700 workers in a corrupt plant shut-down scheme.

THAT'S JUST HIS LONGEST FIGHT, however. The book recounts the effective role he has played in every other kind of social justice struggle our country has seen, including police brutality, oppression of women, fair housing, fair employment and tenants rights, among others.

"Bring a crowd." Yes. We all know that it is masses of people in action who make the turning points in history. Since might concentrated in a few hands usually does wrong, everyday folk must organize in large numbers if they are to defend themselves and advance against elite powers that threaten their freedom, well-being and survival. But the insight, charisma, patience, and motivation needed to "bring a crowd" takes creativity and genius possessed by very few. As union man Ed Sadlowski says of Lumpkin in the foreword, "Maybe, if you're lucky enough, you'll cross paths with someone like him within your own lifetime."

What path is Lumpkin on? As this book shows, people like Frank Lumpkin don't just happen. Born in 1916, Lumpkin comes from a family whose upward mobility began on plantations and sharecropping land in Georgia and then in the orange groves of Florida at a time when Afro-Americans did most of the picking. Big, powerful and smart—and fortified by a family that prized work, study and standing up against racism—Frank worked in fields, chauffeured, boxed as "K.O." Lumpkin and moved to Buffalo and became a steelworker in the early 1940s.

LUMPKIN IS ONE OF 10 BROTHERS AND SISTERS. And *Always Bring A Crowd* is a family saga as well as a story that represents the best qualities of the Afro-American people and Americans in general. All of the Lumpkins appear throughout the book, and author Beatrice "Bea" Lumpkin, Frank's wife, paints their portraits and captures their characters in speech as deftly as any novelist.

Led by the examples of their parents, who never quit struggling to improve the family's conditions, and of young activist siblings like sister Jonnie, most of the Lumpkins got involved in union and other progressive work, several around and in the Communist Party of the United States. The lynching in uniform of Taft Rollins, a black soldier, was

an catalyst that set them on the path of seeing a different socioeconomic system as key in fighting racism in the many forms they encountered it.

The book's structure, the way the author tells the story, is unique. The ordinary chronology of biography is there. But also, assembled like a collage, are the voices of workers and neighbors and friends joining those of the family. Only one of the 10 Lumpkin siblings broke into white-collar work, and even that sister, Bessie Mae, stayed true to her class roots and worked for labor unions and the CPUSA.

Those who know of the American Communist movement only through the "Russian spies" and "dupes of aliens" and "fellow travelers" stereotypes of the J. Edgar Hoover, Joe McCarthy/Nixon/Reagan line, or from the more liberal strains of anti-communism, will get an entirely different and more complex view of that history in this book.

Basically, the destructive forces that distinguish this century—racism, world war, corporate tyranny—tempered into steel Lumpkin's qualities of courage, optimism and philosophical development through great reading and bold action. He has fought consistently for racial justice, jobs, the right to vote, the right to adequate education and working conditions, for an end to world war, colonialism, and weapons of mass destruction. And these objectives led him into the Communist, labor and peace movement.

Bea Lumpkin captures the excitement of the challenges that brought the best out in Frank and his fellow workers, spouses and neighbors as they fought in word and deed to make the corporations obey the law and the union contract. The company kept shifting corporate skins like a snake, but Frank and the young labor attorney Tom Geoghegan (GAY-gen) finally cornered it. The workers won \$4 million, thanks to bankruptcy laws designed to help corporations skip out workers and their communities, but that was only about a sixth of what they were owed. (Also see Geoghegan's *Which Side Are You On?*)

"I'm a very patient man," Lumpkin said at the end of it all. Of course it was not the end. Lumpkin was active in Chicago politics, ran for unsuccessfully for the state legislature and continues to fight for job-creation and living-wage programs to this day.

Along the way, Frank and Bea visited Chile, Cuba, Mozambique, Senegal, Western Europe and other countries. His observations about these countries, their economies, the labor movement and progressive politics are travelogues from a worker's point of view.

THE WORKER'S POINT OF VIEW is a far broader and wiser perspective than the caricatures like Archie Bunker, Ralph Kramden and the wolf-whistling, racist and profane construction workers of our commercials and movies. As Lumpkin sees it, his point of view emanates from the science of Marxism. He wanted answers to the social conditions he saw in life, and when it comes to society, the top science is Marxism—not as a source of doctrine and dogma, but as a way to study "like mathematics," in which "if you put down the right figures, you get the right answer." That may sound simplistic, but thanks to the many dialogues between Frank and other workers that Bea recorded, readers will see that plain talk can convey the same probing of ideas and ethics that one finds in the classical Greek philosophers.

Here is a sample dialogue between Frank Lumpkin and his brother-in-law, Al Ellis:

Al: "You think you could get a six-hour day under capitalism?"

Frank: "Yes, I think so. It will be a struggle, but we will get it. We need a committee. A lot of guys have ideas but don't know how to put it in words. Unity. That's the main lesson I hope the Wisconsin Steel workers learned from Save Our Jobs. When workers unite, they can win. I told Geoghegan, I'm as interested in the struggle as in winning the money. I'm interested in workers learning their strength, not just someone being a 'smart aleck.' The money ain't the whole thing. The fight isn't just for money. It's for justice for working people. It's not simple to separate the two.

"There is a solution to the problems and together we can find it... I have proof because we have done it."

IMAGINE WHAT ACHIEVEMENTS could be won on a national scale if the confused, disheartened and insecure working people of this country had a leader, a movement, an organization with this political effectiveness.

One thing is for sure: the big industrial, investment and banking firms in this country have imagined just that. So it will be hard to get Lumpkin's story out, regardless of how wonderfully told this riveting story is.

The powers that be would rather that not many of us know what it takes to be able to "bring a crowd." It takes a Frank Lumpkin. A worker learned and intelligent who can speak the language of the neighborhoods, factories, shops and farmlands, and who can unite men and women and unite the red and yellow and the brown, black and white, as we all sang in the children's hymn of old.

**A NATION WITHIN A NATION: AMIRI BARAKA (LEROI JONES) & BLACK POWER POLITICS**, by **Komozi Woodard**. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), \$45.00, cloth, 352 pages, ISBN 0-807-82457-7. *Reviewed by Michael Nash*

**A** *NATION WITHIN A NATION: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics*, by Komozi Woodard, traces the political life of Amiri Baraka and the influence he has had on the new Black Arts Movement and the Modern Black Convention Movement, both of which took firm root in Newark, New Jersey during the 1960s. Woodard characterizes the controversial poet and playwright as the Malcolm X of the literary world, and rightfully so. Just as Malcolm liberated the thinking of a new generation of young revolutionaries and intellectuals during the 1950s and the turbulent 1960s, Baraka liberated the thinking of a new generation of young aspiring artists and social activists in the '70s and '80s, making a unique and major contribution to black political and social thought in the realm of literature.

Baraka's life struggle has meant different things to different people. For some, it represents the fuel that ignited a much-needed fire in the world of black literature and political activism. For others, it was not his politics or his style that attracted them to him, but rather his devotion to his craft, his passion, and his deep sense of commitment to the struggle of black and working-class people. For sure, it was largely his bold and uncompromising "Black Power" stance that catapulted him into the national and international literary limelight. "Black Power," the slogan popularized by the late Kwame Toure (formerly Stokely Carmichael), was given an active and practical role in Newark power politics during the 1960s and '70s, and it was Amiri Baraka who was at the helm of this dynamic and unprecedented effort to transform this racially polarized and volatile urban community through transforming the thinking of the black and working-class masses.

Few writers were and are as gifted, bold, honest, and openly passionate as Baraka. And few have been able to capture the attention and spark the interest in writing of young black poets and intellectuals as the aging Baraka has. Indeed, at the age of 67, this towering literary figure, through his art, continues to agitate and advocate for a new kind of American society that is free of racism, classism and women's oppression. In this sense, he was very similar to the architects of the Harlem Renaissance. However, unlike his predecessors of the Harlem Renaissance, namely the widely celebrated Langston Hughes, Claude

McKay and James Weldon Johnson, to name a few, Baraka combines a unique brand of political activism, cultural nationalism, and Third World Marxism to crystallize a distinct art form that is representative of the struggle for black writers to find their inner voice and to liberate themselves intellectually and spiritually from the lingering effects of American slavery and neo-colonialism.

**T**HE STRUGGLE to eliminate these effects, Baraka insists, must be waged by the people themselves. He was the first major literary figure to suggest that such an approach would not only be in the best interest of African American writers, but that it would also be in the best interest of our country, since racism, classism and sexism were the major "isms" that were destroying the American society from within. It is for this reason that American historians in general, and African American historians in particular, must acknowledge Baraka as one of our wise elders, valued mentors and noble patriots. Indeed, Baraka, almost single-handedly, was successful in raising the cultural and political consciousness of a new generation of black artists—poets, playwrights and novelists—that is committed to living life, as he phrases it, "in the tradition." That is, in the tradition of those who lived, fought, and died to bring about progressive change.

If there is a weakness in Woodard's book it is his failure to examine the evolution and complexity of Baraka's spiritual development relative to his brief, but very significant encounter with Islam and Shaykh Hesham Jaaber, the Muslim cleric and social activist from Elizabeth, New Jersey who led the *janaza* prayer (Muslim funeral prayer) on behalf of the family of Malcolm X after his assassination. It was Jaaber who often visited him at the Spirit House in the '60s, taught Arabic and Islamic Studies there, and gave Baraka the Arabic version of his name (Barakat), which was later Swahilized under the influence of Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa. The details of how this encounter impacted on Baraka's spiritual life remain obscure.

The reality of white supremacy still reigns in the ethnocentric character of Western society and culture. It is for this reason that countercultures continue to challenge the hegemony of Western philosophy and thought. However, with respect to the evolution of black cultural and political protest in major urban centers, Woodard's analysis serves to obscure the contributions of several important nationalistic groups that laid a foundation for the concept of nationhood, namely, the Moorish Science Temple of America, The Nation of Islam and the indigenous Sunni Islam Move-

ment. Such groups, despite being closely linked to Africa and Asia in their cosmologies, have not been fully appreciated for their contributions to the development of this concept due to their style of protest and brand of religious nationalism.

NEVERTHELESS, Woodard's study offers an insightful and in-depth analysis of Baraka's contribution to the black liberation struggle. This achievement makes him an important writer on the life of Amiri Baraka, and goes a long way in helping us to better understand both the poet and the social dynamics that helped to produce the Black Power politics that he so boldly and adamantly fought and stood for. Woodard makes it categorically clear that although a class struggle exists within black America, now more than ever before in the history of the United States, the larger and more pervasive issue is still the institutionalized racism that was engineered and perpetuated by the white power structure in this country. *A Nation Within a Nation, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* chronicles the influence of Baraka on international, national and local Newark politics, and shows how he was effectively able to create a new and lasting revolutionary consciousness in today's new breed of students, young black poets, historians, intellectuals, and social and political activists.



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