

Book Reviews

***The Georgia of the North: Black Women and the Civil Rights Movement in New Jersey* Hettie V. Williams**

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Alien Soil: Oral Histories of Great Migration Newark

Katie Singer

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The advent of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence provides an opportunity to reflect on ways to commemorate the ongoing project of democracy in United States. This moment requires we consider the periods in which women and men over the last two and half centuries have endeavored to build community and coalition in order to forge a nation that observes its founding principles and self-evident truths. Rutgers University Press has published two timely books that consider the influence of the Great Migration of African Americans from the Southern states to the North in the transformation of American life and politics in twentieth century New Jersey. This is a review of Hettie V. Williams's *The Georgia of the North: Black Women and the Civil Rights Movement in New Jersey* and Katie Singer's *Alien Soil: Oral Histories of Great Migration Newark*.

The Georgia of the North

The Georgia of the North is at the intersection of several fields of historical scholarship. It engages bodies of work like Deborah Gray White's *Too Heavy a Load* and Paula Giddings *When and Where I Enter*, showing how Black women confronted both racism and sexism through

organizational work. *The Georgia of the North* also builds upon Betty Livingston Adams's study of working-class Black women's activism in Summit, New Jersey. Williams takes a broader, statewide approach to the question of Black women's activism, showing how middle class and professional Black women organized social, political, and economic institutions to support Black communities throughout the Garden State, and how their work was instrumental both in the broader Civil Rights movement and statewide efforts to fight racism and sexism in New Jersey. As such, Williams is in conversation with Tom Sugrue's *Sweet Land of Liberty*, Matthew Countryman's *Up South*, and other texts that expand the parameters of the Civil Rights Movement to include northern and western cities of the United States. Her study, by in large, focuses on the period before World War II. As such, *The Georgia of the North* is part of the scholarship of the "long Civil Rights Movement," a concept advanced by Jaquelyn Dowd Hall in her landmark essay "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." Hall expands the 1954–1968 temporal boundaries of the "classic Civil Rights Movement" to include the 1930s and 1940s. In this way, according to Hall, we trace the intellectual and strategic roots of the Civil Rights Movement to the "liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s" that was "intimately tied to the "rise and fall of the New Deal Order," accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s" inspired a "movement of movements" that "def[ies] any narrative of collapse." In *the Georgia of the North*, Williams finds that Black women in New Jersey played vital roles in the long Civil Rights Movement in the decades before the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision. As one example, she explains that Dr. Marion Thompson Wright, a New Jerseyan and the first African American woman to earn a doctorate in history, directed research on school segregation in New Jersey that led to statewide policy aimed at barring racial segregation in public schools. On the

strength of these efforts, Wright became a key member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's research team for the *Brown* case, even as her work came at deep personal cost and sacrifice for herself and her family. Williams spends considerable time detailing how institutional rules at places like Howard University required women like Marion Thompson Wright to make disadvantageous choices that her male peers did not.

The Georgia of the North begins during the First Great Migration when African Americans began to exit the rural South en masse for urban centers in Northern states like New Jersey. In the first chapter, Williams traces the growth of Black communities throughout the state, showing that while African Americans chiefly settled in cities like Newark, Trenton, Atlantic City, Camden, and Paterson, Black folk settled in all 21 counties across the state. More, while many African Americans worked as domestic laborers in various capacities, there was a growing number of tradespeople and professionals. Through the second chapter, Williams details a complex ecosystem of mutual aid societies, hospitals, newspapers, entrepreneurships, and other institutions that not only catered to the needs of growing Black communities but provided the intellectual, strategic, and financial support necessary for contesting racial oppression in New Jersey and beyond. Williams carefully documents the development of Black institutions throughout the state of New Jersey and the expansion of a Black professional class.

Black women were key to the freedom work and growth of the local chapters of the NAACP and local mutual aid societies like the Montclair Young Women's Christian Association, which was the first independent and Black-led YWCA in the nation. According to Williams, "it played an important role in the development of ideas about Black empowerment in the Northern Civil Rights Movement before 1954" (61). Not only did the Montclair YMCA offer "Black women migrants a temporary place to call home," but "it also provided major leadership opportunities for

Black women professionals that were largely absent from the Black church and many civil rights associations at the time” (60). Within this broader context of the Great Migration and Black institution building, Williams profiles three New Jersey women whose leadership advanced Black freedoms and the expansion of civil rights in the state and at the federal level: Anna Arnold Hedgeman, a director of several YMCAs and executive director of the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission under Harry Truman; the entrepreneur Sara Spencer Washington, a native of Norfolk, Virginia, who provided financial support to civil rights causes from wealth generated from her Atlantic City-based Apex Beauty empire; and the forementioned Marion Thompson Wright.

Anna Arnold Hedgeman, notably, was a lead organizer of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 and a cofounder of the National Organization of Women. Hedgeman’s accomplishments are more than significant, yet Williams notes that her achievements were obscured by her male contemporaries. Hedgeman wrote two memoirs that serve as essential sources for a record of her life and accomplishments. For Williams, memoir writing was more than just sharing one’s biography. Using literary analysis and feminist studies, Williams maintains that Black women “turned to self-life-writing as a response to enslavement, sexual violence, and Jim Crow to become known through literary acts of self-articulation” (76–77). It was a self-conscious act of agency to resist being rendered invisible, and thus non-existent, in the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.

Alien Soil

A unique contribution to the growing body of historical literature on Newark, *Alien Soil* is a deeply researched and riveting analysis of African American life in Newark that centers the

voices of Black Newarkers who were part of the Great Migration. The archive for this book is the Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection, a body of 107 interviews that were collected under the direction of the late Drs. Clement A. Price and Giles Wright. The Krueger-Scott Oral History collection, which is available online, has been the basis of several documentaries and exhibits over the years. In *Alien Soil*, Katie Singer presents a model for how archivists, scholars, teachers, and students can employ oral histories in historical research and analysis.

This is not the first book on oral histories of Great Migration Newarkers. In 1982 Aubrey Olsen Faulkner, Wendell Holbrook, and their colleagues published *When I Was Coming Up: An Oral History of Aged Blacks*. There are several differences between the two texts. First, the former oral history project was part of a community outreach program to elder Black Newarkers who lived in public housing in Newark's Central Ward. The Krueger-Scott Oral History Project, as Singer reports in her text, was designed as a component of a larger African American cultural center development project. Another difference is *When I Was Coming Up* is a work of social sciences. As such, the interviewees were kept anonymous to protect their identities as recipients of public services. In *Alien Soil* we learn the names and hear the voices of lesser known and notable Black Newarkers, including former Newark mayor Sharpe James; Coyt Jones, grandfather of current Newark mayor Ras Baraka; and the first African American woman on the Newark City Council, Mildred Crump. The archive is digitally available online.

Alien Soil begins by grounding the reader with an overview of the Great Migration. Singer could have simply provided a chronology of dates, names, and destinations to retell the story of the Black exodus from the rural South to urban centers around the United States. Instead, she employs captions from the paintings of Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series* to chart a narrative of the Great Migration. In this way, Singer introduces readers to the methodology she will employ

throughout the text, wherein she places the oral histories in conversation about a set of themes providing readers not just a list of events, but how Black Newarkers thought about those events. Singer in many ways serves as a facilitator, providing a platform for the narrators and their interviewers to share their perspective on the life and experiences of Black folk in Newark.

Alien Soil is not a chronological history of Black Newark. It is a work of historical analysis, in which the interviewees do the work of analyzing particular topics. To be sure, the first chapter is a genealogy of the Oral History Project, and Singer traces the origins of the oral history project to its namesake, the Krueger-Scott Mansion. She chronicles the life of the mansion, the proprietors who owned it, its decline and disrepair, the efforts to preserve it as a historical landmark, and attempts to redevelop it as an African American cultural center.

The three chapters that follow—"Sundays," "Workdays," and "Hot Days"—explore, respectively, the role of religious institutions and urban life on the day of rest, labor as employment and the work of community organizing, and Newark's "long hot summer" of 1967 through the recollections of the interviewees of the Krueger-Scott Oral History project. The simplicity of the titles belies the ways Singer distills the sheer diversity of experiences and views about life in Newark. She challenges long-standing tropes about Newark, and in doing so invites readers to further explore the oral histories as a set of rich resources that provide lenses into twentieth century Newark. Singer takes to task authors and documentarians who play up the events of July 12–17, 1967, as the penultimate symbol of Newark's decline, and criticizes the "constant flow of theatrical depictions of Newark's mean streets filled with Black marauders, flames and death" (131). Singer points out, or rather as the interviewees divulged, there are different ways of estimating the impact of the hot days of 1967. "From conservative ministers to progressive artists, more than a few of those interviewed shared the view that times were better for the city, and/or for urban African

Americans in general, after that long hot summer of urban ‘race riots’” (165). Moreover, *Alien Soil* furthers criticism of coverage of urban disturbances. One interviewee noted how in 1967:

[The Media] gave the impression that every Black person in every part of Newark was on fire. Part of the was because of the way they showed usually the pictures of the same area pretending it was—not really stating that—pretending it was another part of Newark. (159)

As Singer notes, these methods of fabrication persist in contemporary coverage of uprisings, including Baltimore in 2015 and more recently in Los Angeles, California. As the interviewee concluded “All of Newark was not burnin’ down, you know that.” These types of insights from individuals who lived the history of Newark require that scholars, teachers, and the broader public revisit and question long held assumptions about our collective past.

The strengths of these books are that they focus our gaze on long overlooked historic actors in the literature of New Jersey. Both texts revise the popular narratives of maladaptive Southern Blacks who migrated to the Garden State. Williams and Singer shed light on the interiority of Black life, showing how members of the Great Migration were a diverse group who plied their skills as advocates for themselves, their families, and their communities in Newark, throughout New Jersey, and the broader Black Freedom struggle.

These texts, as noted earlier, arrive at a peculiar historic moment. Three of the narrators in the Krueger-Scott Oral History Project—Midred Crump, Ronald Rice Sr., and Sharpe James—have recently passed away. As vessels of memory, their stories remind us of the urgency of preserving community memories by finding and creating newer archives and reexamining history with thoughtful and novel methods.

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