

Introduction (Journal of African American Studies)

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Abstract:

This special issue marks the 50th anniversary of the assassinations of Defense Captain Mark Clark and Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton of the Illinois State Chapter of the Black Panther Party as well as the murder of Manuel Ramos of the Young Lords and the brutal slayings of Rev. Bruce Johnson and his wife Eugenia Johnson of the Armitage Avenue United Methodist Church, also known as The People's Church. By featuring the three organizations that comprised the "Original" Rainbow Coalition—the Black Panther Party, the Young Patriots, and the Young Lords Organization of Chicago, Illinois, this special issue is in remembrance of the five people cited above.

Keywords: Mark Clark | Fred Hampton | Manuel Ramos | Rev. Bruce Johnson | Eugenia Johnson | Black Panther Party | Young Patriots | Young Lords | American History

Article:

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Coalitions that cut across a variety of socio-economic indices were not a new concept to grassroots organizers. Perhaps the best example of such an effort in the U.S. is the modern Civil Rights Movement that courted people from all walks of life. There were few races and ethnicities that were not instrumental in the success of this societal-changing mass effort. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. may not have used the words Rainbow Coalition, but it is certainly what he had in mind, as his thinking continued to evolve, culminating in the Poor People's Movement, a pet project on which he insisted, but did not live to see come to fruition. Neither did Harold Washington use the words Rainbow Coalition, but some of the people who campaigned on his behalf in 1983 were members of the "Original" Rainbow Coalition that comprised the BPP, the Young Lords

Organization and the Young Patriots and openly spoke of the importance of building such a coalition if Washington was to become the city's first African American mayor. It wasn't, however, until the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's 1984 run for the presidency when he delivered an address at The Democratic National Convention in San Francisco entitled "The Rainbow Coalition" that the words Rainbow Coalition were given a broad hearing, thus sending reporters, journalists, and writers of varying types scrambling to pen newspaper and magazine articles about this presumed novel approach to presidential campaigning. Some academics devoted scholarly journal articles to the Rainbow Coalition while others devoted lengthy book chapters to the concept such as that found in Manning Marable's *Black American Politics: from the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (Marable 1985). Writers off all stripes, including academics, students, practitioners, and activists, thought it important to explain what Jackson meant by Rainbow Coalition, what it would look like, how he intended to build it, and its potential impact on an electorate that had already experienced four years of Reaganomics. The reduction of government spending under Ronald Reagan spurred economic investment outside of urban areas, thus resulting in unprecedented levels of unemployment among poor and minority populations. Jackson called for people of all races and sexual orientations to join with laborers, disabled veterans and others for the purposes of obtaining political power. Whereas, his organization People to Save Humanity (PUSH) was devoted to fighting for economic and educational opportunities for the historically marginalized, the Rainbow Coalition was created, in large part, to address political empowerment and public policy issues. Academics were so taken with the concept that books sprouted up in the tens, either touting or critiquing Jackson's presidential run.

Jackson was considered by some, a force to be reckoned with within the Democratic Party, a phenomenon, and a candidate unlike anyone the American people had ever seen, all of which may have been true. Jackson would supposedly win the presidency by building a multiethnic, multiclass, multigender, and intergenerational coalition of voters that would not allow the race baiters to undermine the gains made by the modern civil rights movement, and in the process, preclude the country from making history. Jackson was seen as an outsider who dared to campaign differently by bringing people together rather than subscribing to the age-old divide and conquer strategy used previously (mainly along racial lines) by nearly every White candidate who has ever run for the United States presidency. Jackson's approach was hailed as new and fresh. It was, for a presidential candidate, especially an African American one. But the approach wasn't novel, and Jackson was not its inventor.

The Rainbow Coalition was a concept that had been introduced into the American lexicon at least fifteen years earlier by Fred Hampton. Several of the authors in this special issue saw fit to feature Hampton and the "Original" Rainbow Coalition in their work while others opted to acknowledge the 50th anniversary by delving into previously unexplored areas of movement activity, thus unpacking dimensions that bring readers greater insight into the three groups that made up the "Original" Rainbow Coalition. Readers not only learn much about the three organizations, but by explicating and expounding on some of the issues that each group sought to prioritize, such as education, child welfare, access to affordable healthcare, criminal justice reform, and the like each writer brings to life a cast of activists and the forces that opposed them in ways that few writers have been able to do. Finally, readers will learn quite a bit about the five people mentioned earlier, all of whom died a violent death. And while Hampton and Clark are household names among students of the Black Power Movement, few outside of that milieu know much about the the people who were impacted by the example set by those two young men. The fact that Clark and Hampton are still drawing interest from academics and other writers fifty years after their

murders speaks to the legacy each man left behind, the movement to which they devoted their lives, and the world they were striving to create.

References

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