

## Book Reviews

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Benjamin, Ruha. 2013.

*People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 249 pp. \$24.95, ISBN: 9780804782975.

**Reviewed by:** Joyce M. Bell, *University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA*

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With *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*, Ruha Benjamin offers an exceptional analysis of the sociopolitical realm surrounding stem cell research. The book is based on an ethnographic study of the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Initiative in California. In it, she looks at the movement leading up to the 2004 passing of proposition 71, which provided for 3 billion dollars in state funding, the creation of an agency to manage the research and an amendment protecting the right to do stem cell research, and a citizen's oversight committee to govern the whole process. Her work here is truly intersectional and as such reveals how inequality shapes and is shaped by the movement for stem cell research. Covering topics ranging from the siting of stem cell research agencies to the race and class implications in the debate over research on human eggs, Benjamin asks important questions about the dialectical nature of biomedicine. Where the movement to fund and support stem cell research insists that stem cell research is for the common good, *People's Science* asks "whose good?" and "in whose interest?" While she points out that these are not popular questions among those who advocate for stem cell research, she illustrates that the onward march of science at all costs leads to a shutting down of the debates that might lead to more wide-reaching benefit of the stem cell project.

Chapter one details the process of siting the stem cell agency. In it, she looks closely at what these geopolitics reveal about the stem cell initiative. The second chapter challenges the notion of disability showing how its meaning is not universal. Here she points out how the universal veneer of the stem cell initiative, which holds that all disabled people want to be cured, falls flat when one looks, for example, at segments of the deaf population for whom deafness is a matter of identity. Chapter three examines the commodification of human eggs. Here Benjamin explores the politics of egg donation and research, focusing especially on the race and class implications of compensating some donors and not others. Chapters four and five

delve into the racialized dynamic of mistrust in the biomedical arena. Respectively, these chapters illustrate the existence of black mistrust (in particular) in biomedical research and attempt to depathologize this mistrust. In chapter six, Benjamin asks fundamentally: What does the right to stem cell research mean in a society in which basic health care is not a guaranteed right?

The contributions of *Peoples Science* are many. Here I point to just two. First, her critical approach to the issue of stem cell research leads to important insights. For one, the stem cell movement employment of populist language about cures and common goods disguises that low-income and uninsured people are not guaranteed access to the potential cures that the research promises. This is a critical insight that leads Benjamin to look more closely at the disconnect between the largely populist veneer of a relatively exclusive endeavor. Second, where some scholars are pushing for poststatist accounts of biological citizenship, Benjamin points out the important role of the state in systematically excluding some people from both the research apparatus and being potential beneficiaries of stem cell research. In this way, she makes an important case for bringing the state back into studies of science and society.

Ultimately, *People's Science* is a welcome addition to the field. It should be of interest to scholars and a general audience interested in science and society; race, class, and gender; and ethnographic methods. It would be particularly useful in the classroom to teach about the sociology of science and medical sociology or to illustrate the intersectionality of race, class, and gender.

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Nelson, Alondra. 2013.

*Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 312 pp. \$18.95, ISBN 978-0-8166-7649-1.

**Reviewed by:** Ruha Benjamin, *Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA*

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In *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*, Alondra Nelson intervenes in popular accounts of the black power era, in general, and the Black Panther Party, in particular, by situating Panther health politics within the ongoing struggle to establish health as a human right. In this way, *Body and Soul* excavates a buried legacy that is deeply relevant today. Among the most important gridlines animating the text is the idea that poor black communities were (and are) situated at a deadly intersection of medical abandonment *and* overexposure—in Nelson's words a "dialectic of neglect and surveillance" (p. 164). As such, the Party, while skeptical of mainstream medicine, was not "antimedicine." Rather, they formed a "calculated politics of health and race" that connects to

another tension: whereas the movement ventured close to racial essentialism in its advocacy for sickle cell disease, it rejected any suggestion that African Americans were biologically inferior.

Three additional themes are central to the text—anticolonial approaches to health, intraracial gender domination, and competing forms of citizenship, which I will address briefly in turn. Nelson connects the theoretical underpinnings of the Party's health activism to the anticolonial writings of Mao Tsetung, Che Guevara, and Frantz Fanon. This is especially provocative when we consider how the “re-education” model developed by the Panthers, in which they required medical professionals who partnered with them to read anticolonial work, compares to “cultural competency” training found in medical schools today. The latter is often characterized by a kind of cultural determinism in which health-care providers are taught to understand the purported specificity of nonwhite cultural values and behaviors, and where the cultural particularity and power of medical professionals are hardly ever interrogated.

With respect to intraracial gender politics, *Body and Soul* traces the Party's shift from “self-defense to self-determination” and increased investment in social programs, in which women took on expanded responsibility for institution building. Nelson explains that “Just as in the black protest tradition in the American South in which the ‘men led but women organized’, these institution-building activities often had a *gendered division of labor*” (p. 27; emphasis added). However, for women who did not conform to these roles, this traditional sociological framing of oppressive relationships potentially conceals the everyday brutality of gender oppression within social justice movements. For example, former Panther Elaine Brown's memoir *A Taste of Power* (1993) describes the moment when Huey Newton appoints her chairperson of the Party and her trepidation because of the deep-seated sexism among those who she expected would vigorously oppose her leadership: “If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people . . . . The feminists were right. The value of my life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being black and poor” (pp. 357, 367).

In the face of such “obliteration,” the conventional sociological framework of “gendered division of labor” appears inadequate. Sociologist Stephen Steinberg's critique of the language of “race relations” as a euphemism for racial domination offers a productive parallel: “the impact of this nomenclature is to normalize and naturalize racial oppression, to pretend it is consensual, and to conceal its violent underpinnings and periodic atrocities . . . . A popular adage holds: ‘Don't piss on me and call it rain.’” Applied to the sociologist, it might read: “Don't deny me my rights, my livelihood, and my dignity, and call it ‘race relations’” (pp. 39-40), to which we should add, or call it “gender roles.” In this way, Nelson's analysis lays bare the ever-present paradox in many social justice movements—simultaneously challenging hegemonic forms of patriarchy (in this case, medical patriarchy) while leaving gender domination in tact within the movement.

A third theme is the tension between *social* citizenship based on civic belonging and *biological* citizenship based on bodily illness and genetic characteristics. To the extent that current health justice advocates continue to wrestle with the trade-off between short-term forms of biomedical redress and long-term socioeconomic transformations, the text raises an especially poignant question—“*what are the transaction costs of biological citizenship?*” (p. 163; emphasis added). Here, the Panthers’ experience is cautionary: “marginalized communities were left with an anemic if sometimes efficacious form of biological inclusion in the place of racial equality, social justice, and economic citizenship” (p. 184).

In conclusion, *Body and Soul* sets a standard for social excavation. When one considers how incredibly hard it is for any living matter to “to leave a tangible record of [its] presence on the Earth ensuring that the fossil record is inherently skewed” (Judson 2008), the import of this text is ever more apparent. In expanding and deepening the grid of intelligibility through which we understand the Black Panther Party, Nelson reveals how central they are to any vision of health as a human right.

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Bell, Joyce. 2014.

*The Black Power Movement and American Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press. 256 pp. \$36.00, ISBN: 9780231162609.

**Reviewed by:** Saida Grundy, *Boston University, Boston, MA, USA*  
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In June 1966, civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael led a crowd of civil rights marchers in a chant that would forever change the landscape of race in America: “What do you want?” he boomed. “BLACK POWER!” was the response.

That term, “Black Power,” would bring forth a social movement that drastically changed black social and political consciousness beginning in the 1960s. But after rising to its peak fervor in the 1970s, where did it go? In *The Black Power Movement*

*and American Social Work*, Joyce Bell provides an analysis for how, rather than dying off, the movement was conscientiously absorbed into institutions. Notably, social scientists and historians have previously looked to Black Power as the crucible of black studies in higher education. Bell, however, points us to the understudied transformation of American social work, from a field comprised mainly of white women tasked with involving the state in the lives of the black urban poor, to one which, by the 1980s, saw black social workers and their respective organizations capturing national attention. It was black social workers who articulated black liberation politics into their controversial demands and practices regarding trans-racial adoption and African-centered learning. It was black social workers who famously claimed that white racism was “America’s number one mental health problem” (p. 2)

Bell’s central claim here is that both popular and scholarly assessments of the Black Power have too often examined the movement as a fleeting, finite historical moment, and a radical, untenable aside to the mainstream civil rights era. Sociologists have overly relied on legislative changes as the endgame metric of the successful black movements and, thus, have widely disregarded and understudied Black Power’s long-term impact: its success and ideological dominance in creating and transforming blackness within institutions. In short, the civil rights movement may have forced the legislative hand of white discrimination, but it was Black Power that forged black identities, spaces, and agendas into post-civil rights institutions.

Bell’s focus on social work bridges the scholarship between social movements, organizational studies, and work in ways that sociologists have often overlooked for white-collar professions. She relies on archival research and oral history interviews gathered across two professional organizations. Black dissenters seeking to challenge the profession’s mainstream organization, the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW), from within founded the first group, the National Federation of Settlements (NFS). The second group was founded on separatist tenets and broke from NCSW to form the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW).

Bell’s key findings diagnose how these two groups articulated liberation politics into the profession. First, she aligns the groups’ inceptions with their burgeoning activist identities. This early identity called for the profession’s social action to move beyond the “paper activism” that had come to typify bureaucratic advocacy in mainstream social work (p. 70). Bell argues that as Black Power hit its groundswell, black social workers borrowed strategies that called for direct action. This turn into civil rights activism ultimately led NFS toward integrationist aims and the demand for “Black Faces in High Places” within NCSW. In contrast, the second group in Bell’s inquiry, the NABSW, employed a separatist strategy (literally staging a walkout from the NCSW annual meeting) that operationalized Black Power’s nationalist “rank closing” ideologies into the profession. NABSW, unlike the integrationist aims of NFS, concerned itself with bringing the profession into black communities instead of bringing blacks into the profession. Such a shift stressed anticlassist forms of black identity and a resistance to forms of professionalization that would detach black social

workers from the issues facing black communities. This ideological break proved significant and would set a precedent for chartering similar black professional organizations (including the Association of Black Sociologists in 1968).

I would note that Bell's chapters are meticulously researched, highly descriptive, and her archival data would satiate any historian of work, organizations, or social movements. Indeed, the book and the organization of its chapters lean more toward using historiography to illustrate organizational mechanisms and critique sociology's misunderstandings of a movement than they do toward conventional empirical sociology. However, given that Bell collected interview data, one can be disappointed at the sparse use of firsthand narratives. One can still be left wanting for the voices and understandings of the black professionals at the forefront of these efforts. Her already rich analysis, then, could account for how black social workers themselves were institutionalized by and into the profession along with the movement.

The impact of this book, however, should be far reaching, particularly given how well timed its accounts are of how institutions can essentially absorb social movements. As I write this, in December 2015, over 52 colleges and universities have erupted with protests from black students and faculty demanding redress to institutionalized racial injustice. Bell's work lays the theoretical and empirical groundwork for future literature to explore the articulation of the Black Lives Matter movement into higher education and, ultimately, to reassess the effectiveness of other movements for racial justice. As such, she makes a highly valuable contribution to both popular and scholarly discourses.

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