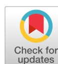

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KEISHA N. BLAIN'S *UNTIL I AM FREE: FANNIE LOU HAMER'S ENDURING MESSAGE TO AMERICA*

Reading Keisha Blain's *Until I am Free* represents a significant moment in my journey to understand poverty and my unique, personal relationship with Black history.[1] As a child living in a "safe," predominantly white, middle-class suburb, it took me a while to understand my own privilege. My parents spent their youth navigating through a segregated America. Therefore, when opportunities came in desegregated spaces, they seized them all, at great personal cost to their health and family life. Behind the veneer of suburban privilege, white standards of beauty, conventional notions of intelligence, and the absence of Black history in my junior- and high-school curriculum were some of the challenges my sister and I faced, but there was more. Racial epithets, verbal and physical bullying, and ostracization peppered our childhoods. While my sister, Lisa, fought them off with quick comebacks and her fists, I took refuge in books – a reality we kept from our parents. However, in addition to my passion for learning, I wanted to fight too. I eventually left the suburbs and accepted an internship with the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV), a homeless advocacy group in Washington, DC where I lived and worked with the homeless. Meanwhile, I continued to pursue my education, to fill the gaps in my knowledge about my ancestors and Black history more broadly, by centering my master's degree on my ancestor, the freed slave Marguerite Guillory, and focussing on race, class, gender, and homelessness in my PhD thesis.

Despite these formal degrees, my knowledge of Fannie Lou Hamer remained cursory and informal. I had heard extracts of her "powerful" speeches and read about her "fearless activism."[2] Unfortunately, I never had an opportunity to further

[1] Keisha N. Blain, *Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2022).

[2] Keisha N. Blain, "God Is Not Going to Put It in Your Lap': What Made Fannie Lou Hamer's Message on Civil Rights so Radical – And So Enduring," *Time*, 4 Oct. 2019, at https://time.com/5692775/fannie-lou-hamer; Blain, "This Speech Changed the Course of Black Voting Rights in America Fannie Lou Hamer was 'Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired,' and She Told the 1964 Democratic National Convention," *Timeline*, 23 Aug. 2016, at https://timeline.com/hamer-speech-voting-rights-d5f6ddc7470a. See also Maegan Parker Brooks, *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

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my knowledge of her impact on the civil rights movement, simply because my focus on urban poverty led me in a different direction. A quick Google search tells us that she delivered her famous "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired" speech on 20 December at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. She worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to improve Black voter registration. She helped raise awareness of the struggle for citizenship for Black men and women in Mississippi. We also learn that she suffered severe physical and financial consequences for her activism. However, I wanted to know more than just the Wikipedia version of this woman who reminded me of my aunt, the late Charlesetta Carter.

As for my studies, I made the choice to focus my research on what happened to inner-city communities after the Great Society legislation passed into law and most of the major civil rights figures were either assassinated, exiled, or literally too sick or too tired. Consequently, I was delighted to attend a conference of Americanists in Liverpool in 2019 as a PhD student, where a panelist scheduled to present her take on Hamer's activism allowed me to engage with this historical figure more formally. After listening to a well-researched yet conventional presentation, I raised my hand and asked two questions: (1) what did it mean to be a Black woman during the 1960s? (2) Was Fannie Lou Hamer on food stamps? Following a very long, uncomfortable silence from an unprepared panelist – after all, who expects to get questions about the lived experiences behind such an iconic figure – the chairperson called for an early break. My questions went unanswered. However, I remained determined to get answers.

In 2021, I came across a publication announcement of Blain's book and immediately contacted her publicist to request an interview for the academic blog *Black Perspectives*. This collaboration resulted in two entries: "Fannie Lou Hamer's Legacy: An Interview with Keisha N. Blain" in September of 2021 and "Until I Am Free: Teaching Fannie Lou Hamer Past and Present" in February of 2022.[3] As past and future readers of *Until I Am Free* already know or will discover, the answers to my questions were answered in some very disturbing and tragic ways. My first realization was the extent to which southern Black women were at the mercy of a white-supremacist medical culture that sought to control Black bodies through clandestine sterilizations.[4] My second discovery was the pervasive and pernicious effects of rural poverty in the Black community. The levels of disease and malnutrition described in Blain's book are ones I did not expect to read about in a Western country of means such as the United States, even in the South. Blain's rigorous scholarship and insightful understanding of her subject allowed me to see Hamer beyond her iconization. She explains her main objectives in writing *Until I Am Free*:

> As I wrote the book, I tried to be attentive to the many challenges Hamer endured, including the impact of poverty on her life and the violence she experienced. I should also note that I wanted

[3] Nicole M. Gipson, "Fannie Lou Hamer's Legacy: An Interview with Keisha N. Blain," *Black Perspectives* (blog), 27 Sept. 2021, at www.aaihs.org/fannie-lou-hamers-legacy-an-interview-with-keisha-n-blain; Gipson, "Until I Am Free: Teaching Fannie Lou Hamer Past and Present" *Black Perspectives* (blog), 3 Feb. 2022, at www.aaihs.org/until-i-am-free-teaching-fannie-lou-hamer-past-and-present.

[4] Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

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the book to capture the love Hamer felt for her family and the compassion she felt for her community.[5]

As you, the reader, may have surmised, learning is a very personal way for me to shape my reality and to fight against the oppressive forces of ignorance and racism. This lifelong drive to develop the field of poverty studies is not a fascination with or adulation of the poor but a reflection of my genuine curiosity about and compassion for those in need, a constituent part of who I am. I am a Black historian.

What is Black history for Black scholars? Our gaze into the eyes of this misty mirror of rememory is above all an intimate, distinctive relationship, one we must claim as our own personal expression of self-care and self-love. This organic, deep-seated connection is a sacred transaction, forged through generations of sacrifice and sealed in bone and blood. To be a Black scholar is to strike a bargain with the past. In exchange for our commitment to do right by our unique heritage in the search for our ancestors and our history, we make one simple demand of the past – "please, don't let us forget who we are."

University of Bristol NICOLE GIPSON

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RICHARD CORLISS, *TALKING PICTURES: SCREENWRITERS IN THE AMERICAN CINEMA*

Over the years, if one book has made me revisit its pages and think about its provocations more than any other, it is probably Richard Corliss's 1974 treatise *Talking Pictures*: *Screenwriters in the American Cinema*.[1] Although a journalist by trade, Corliss was one of the few critics by the early 1970s who had studied film academically. For a time, this background led him to be editor-in-chief of the journal *Film Comment*, part magazine, part hip new American cinema periodical. In 1980, Corliss became the chief film critic of *Time* magazine until his untimely death in 2015. *Talking Pictures* was his first book and arguably his best. Its unprepossessing agenda was, in one sense, to do no more than subdivide a list of Hollywood's most prominent – and principally male, it must be admitted – writers and writer–directors according to Corliss's own tastes and qualitative standards. On publication and then subsequently, *Talking Pictures* proved to be more groundbreaking than anyone, least of all Corliss himself, could have expected.

Corliss's book was, in effect, a major retort to the (directorial) auteur theory that had taken academic film studies by storm in the 1960s. That movement, emanating originally from the stable of critics and filmmakers at French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, enforced a theory of grand control by directors who were lauded for their vision of a movie to the exclusion, in most cases, of all others working on a picture.

[5] Gipson, "Fannie Lou Hamer's Legacy".

[1] Richard Corliss, *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema* (New York: Penguin, 1974).

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