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Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2014. 311 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-06217-4.

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In 2012 the United Nations declared it the *Year of Cooperatives* because of the mighty contributions that cooperative enterprises have realized in terms of economic development and inclusive business models for marginalized groups. In 2014, the UN declared 2014-2023 the decade of persons of African descent. This book merges these two major global events: cooperatives and Black people. Jessica Gordon Nembhard, an African American scholar, with deep roots in community economic development, has contributed a critical account of the social economy in the lives of Black people from the 1700's to 2007. Her work on cooperatives in the United States is situated within the global movement of cooperatives. She uses the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)'s definition of cooperatives as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise."² Gordon Nembhard argues that the Black experience in cooperatives in the Americas is rich and vibrant and is one of activism that is rooted in a cultural struggle for human rights.

During the age of nineteenth-century industrialization, people such as the Rochdale pioneers protested against the ways that industry dominated their lives and organized a counter-movement embedded within a cooperative project, and this

collective action is the go to reference for social economy in terms of establishing alternative businesses (Fairbairn no date).³ In essence, the Rochdale principles are the gold standard for cooperatives to adhere to democracy, education, and transparency (ICA 1995).⁴ African American cooperatives and self-help groups all followed the Rochdale Pioneers values and principles. Gordon Nembhard makes a stellar contribution to social economy literature and she injects a new voice into what social economy means for people of colour. This book is a comprehensive review of African Diasporic uses of collective institutions in the United States.

Social economy literature, particularly in the Canadian context, has tended to be written in a generic way to theorize about economics and exclusion in books such as *Understanding the Social Economy: A Canadian Perspective* (Quarter, Mook and Armstrong 2009) and *Social Economy: International Debates and Perspectives* (Shragge, Eric and Jean-Marc Fontan 2000). However, it is important to focus on social economy, its development on specific racialized groups and the nature of various practices. This is one of the first social economy books to examine cooperative economics from the African Diaspora in the Americas.

This book in essence refutes a European starting point for cooperative development because Gordon Nembhard's traces the collective organizing of Black people since the time of slavery. Furthermore, she argues that Black people's idea of mutual aid and collective activities were not introduced by other races, rather this was a self-orchestrated project. To hold that collective organizing was occurring outside of the dominant white power structure is a profound finding. Mutual aid societies among slaves stem as far back as the 1700's if not earlier. In the Caribbean, the Bossales

(African-born slaves) in Santo Domingue (called Haiti today) were engaging in Sol (collective informal banks) as early as the 1600's (Heinel and Heinel 2005).

As a Black Canadian woman teaching social economy, I find that the academic literature generally does a poor job of including the positive contributions of the African Diaspora. One exception would be the edited collection about rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) by Shirley Ardener and Sandra Burman in *Money-go-Rounds* (1995) in which the authors examine the various ways that marginalized people of colour, particularly women, organize collective banks to build support groups both in the global South and developed world. However, works highlighting African people's activity in cooperatives is lacking. The material most often points to the ways that (usually white) foreigners introduced cooperatives to people in colonized lands, thus leaving a troubled cooperative history (Develterre 1993). Gordon Nembhard's work fills this void and focuses on the Black experience in cooperatives and social economy from slave times in the 1700's right up to the 2000's.

Gordon Nembhard explained in an interview on the *Laura Flanders Show* (2014) that in her initial conversations she found that many of the Black people that she spoke to were not aware of their cooperative past (or that perhaps they may have been too afraid to speak about it). However, once she shared this cooperative history with them, they embraced it whole-heartedly. The stories of Black cooperatives in the Americas is missing from history books, and this may explain why people are not aware of the rich tradition of collectivity among persons of African descent. Gordon Nembhard's work is a testimony to personal dedication and persistence. She managed to uncover many stories about cooperatives formed and led by African-American men and women. The

book outlines two key questions: (1) Have Black folk ever practiced cooperative economics? and (2) Why would resources be allocated for this? In asking these two questions, Gordon Nembhard re-writes economic history to show that Black people have been major actors in cooperative development and thinking. Her work also acknowledges the role of marginalized Black Americans, especially women, in the cooperative movement (e.g. Ladies Auxiliaries, Freedom Quilting Bee). Though the African American cooperative story has been suppressed, this book documents the pragmatic organizing of racially marginalized people for the betterment of their communities.

Gordon Nembhard's book has been ten years in the making because it draws on existing literature, but also from primary sources that were not readily available or easily located. Black cooperatives in the Americas is what she refers to as a "hidden" past. Yet, African Americans collectively organizing is no secret because the community organized cooperative enterprises through various channels: churches, schools or jobs. Although a trained economist, she had to become a historian digging for deeply buried information and tracking down obscure periodicals such as *Negro World*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, or *Crisis* and logging the countless one-liners dealing with cooperatives in diaries and letters. Some of the most minute details are found in her endnotes. In what seems painstaking archival work and many hours of listening to oral histories, Gordon Nembhard managed to bring to life material about cooperatives among African Americans starting from as far back as the 1700's. The time-line at the back of the book helps to orient the various cooperative events in American history from a Black perspective.

To tell the story of Black cooperators, the book is organized into three main parts, with each section made of three chapters feeding into the one before: (1) Early African American Cooperative Roots; (2) Deliberate Cooperative Economic Development and (3) Twentieth-century practices, twenty-first century solutions. Gordon Nembhard anchors her case studies of examples of Black people engaging in cooperative economics in Black cooperative economic thought. WEB Du Bois' concept of group economics urged African Americans to come together to create solidarity businesses to help one another. Despite the feud between Du Bois and Jamaican-born Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Gordon Nembhard shows that both men were aligned on the idea of collective businesses for people of colour.⁵ Garvey's push for Pan-African economic cooperation is a theory that is deeply followed by Black communities such as the Nation of Islam and Rastafarians. Rastafarians in the Caribbean regard Garvey as a prophet in part because of his ideas on Black-owned collective enterprises and self-reliance through business (K'adamwe, Bernard and Dixon, 2011). It should be noted that a young Garvey was most likely influenced by community-driven Partner banks (collective banks) in St. Ann's, Jamaica because this was a mainstay activity taking place under colonization.

The book's title, *Collective Courage* captures that real-life dangers posed by Black people's organizing. One of the most poignant reminders in this book, is that the Underground Railroad between America and Canada was a collective effort and a sharing of resources. Harriett Tubman, an African-American who assisted hundreds of slaves into freedom in Canada was central in this collective movement. Under slavery, during the Jim Crow era and into modern times, African-American groups were

threatening. Black managed groups, informal or formal, were (and still are) viewed as subversive. In Guyana, Maurice St. Pierre (1999) detailed that slaves took chances coming together to organize market days and to participate in savings clubs. Gordon Nembhard also demonstrates the serious risks and threats to life and security that Blacks weathered when they belonged to cooperative enterprises. In Canada, we need to start thinking about the histories and role of cooperatives for persons of African descent.

An example of imminent danger was the threat directed against cooperatives in the southern states. The Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Co-operative Union (CFNACU) was the largest-ever organization of Black Americans with 250,000 members with a mission to provide self-help to Black farmers in Mississippi. This collective was an object of harrassment and defamation. Even worse was the massacre in Leflore, Mississippi of possibly hundreds of African-Americans by local illegal militias (2014:56-8). Gordon Nembhard (2014) argues that Black leaders had to go underground to organize because of the threat of lynching. Although I do not think Gordon Nembhard states this explicitly, I find that the organizing risks taken on the part of many African Americans speaks to the political nature of social economy organizing.

Especially during the period of Trans Atlantic Slavery, Black people coming together to organize for a social good was viewed as a dangerous and transgressive activity. Not only did unruly racist white mobs attack Black cooperative members but U.S. government agents found ways to sabotage the economic activities of many Black-run cooperatives. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives started in 1967 to assist poor farmers was an apex organization of many Black cooperatives who were not able

to sustain themselves in the long-term because of political interference.⁶ In spite of the FBI harassment of its member organizations and its own organization, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives has persevered. However, many of the cooperatives and member-owned institutions discussed in this book have not been able to last because of the overt racism, violence, and harassment directed against Black economic projects. Gordon Nembard (83) argues that Black cooperative practice throughout America experienced an intense form of “violence, sabotage, the hostility of competitors, and structural class and racial discrimination often made it difficult to survive and eventually defeated these cooperative efforts.”

For far too long the study of social economy in the Americas has not been political enough and it has played it rather safe. Perhaps, it has been calm because the struggle of economic cooperation for persons of African descent is largely missing. This book fills that gap. Gordon Nembard’s work is brilliant because it expands the academic theories used within social economy to include Black political thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Mosiah Garvey. Why are these Black thinkers not the mainstream in analyzing social economy in Canada? Many of Canada’s Black and immigrant populations have arguably connected to these ideas or would still do so today. Gordon Nembard also speaks to the Black Canadian communities in Buxton, Ontario. The author documents the practice of cooperative economics among Black people in the Americas and shows how marginalized Black people figured out how to work around unjust systems to help one another.

The Black cooperative legacy is thought-provoking since it points to the cruel economics of racism and the denial of access to goods and services to Black persons.

The free market mantra of a trickle-down theory in America is a myth as persons of African heritage have been systematically excluded from economic and social opportunities. Yet, when Black people do aim for self-reliance they are confronted by covert/overt acts of racism to diminish or destroy their economic activities.

People of the African Diaspora have made serious contributions to the concept of alternative development. Africans' historical ability to organize collectively, despite horrendous social impediments and material deprivations, is what sustained slaves and colonized people in the Americas. Gordon Nembhard's *Collective Courage* is an inspiring account of Black people's resilience as expressed through their ability to create cooperative enterprises. It is also an emotional story of pain and suffering of the Black Diaspora under class and race-based oppression. African-Americans as a racially marginalized group had to rely on boot-strap development to survive in a hostile environment where laws were against the Black citizenry. The cooperative experience of African-Americans is one that can resonate with persons of African descent elsewhere because it recalls the similarity of experience of the struggle of a marginalized people to cope with hostile economic and political environments.

This analysis of social economy is eye-opening because it situates the Black experience on its own terms as pioneers of collective economics. For Canadian teachers of social and economic justice, this book should be a core text because it situates collective organizing as political action for racially marginalized groups. Ideas of community and the pooling of resources are a firmly rooted African tradition, and this legacy of collectivity has stayed with its diaspora in the Americas in a powerful and meaningful way.

Endnotes

¹ This is a slightly adapted version of the review to appear in The Journal of Co-operative Studies. Permission was granted to reprint it.

² See Gordon Nembhard's (2004, 2) reference to the International Cooperative Alliance.

³ The concept of "Rochdale" refers to the English weavers who were dislocated by industrialization and who then created a cooperative in 1844 (1-9). See more information at the University of Saskatchewan: <http://usaskstudies.coop/pdf-files/Rochdale.pdf>

⁴The seven cooperative principles developed at the 1995 Centenary Congress of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA): open membership, democratic control, common ownership, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for the community. See more at the International Cooperative Alliance website: <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles> (date of last access 22 October 2014)

⁵ Jamaican scholar Rupert Lewis at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica may be one of the best authorities on the subject of Marcus Garvey and his business activities.

⁶ An apex organization is the over-arching organization or network that includes many independent member organizations.

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