

## Book Review

### Fire Dreams: Making Black Feminist Liberation in the South

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‘Fire has long been used as a tool of terror in the South,’ Deon explained, ‘but it can also be a powerful force for rebirth’ (p. 130)

What does it take to produce alternative worlds? Where are the alternative visions produced? How are the alternative visions realised? How are fire dreams nurtured with love, solidarity, compassion and grit? *Fire Dreams: Making Black Feminist Liberation in the South* delves deep into such profound questions, offering an embodied account of alternative world-making through the lens of Women With A Vision (WWAV) – an organisation that literally rose from the ashes of a fire after an arsonist attack on its offices in 2012. The book has been jointly written by Laura McTighe and Women With A Vision. Laura McTighe is an expert writing in the fields of race, religion, and the abolition of slavery, focussing on collaborative knowledge production to analyse and resist racial capitalism. *Fire Dreams* is a testament to her long-standing interests in producing alternative knowledges. Women With A Vision is a community-based, nonprofit, black feminist organisation founded in 1989 and situated in the New Orleans, USA. The organisation is devoted to the improvement of the conditions of ‘marginalized women, their families and communities’ through collaborative work.

*Fire Dreams* chronicles WWAV’s relentless pursuit of justice, detailing what they do, how they do it, and, most importantly, why they do it. Through a deeply personal-political-collective account of WWAV’s resistance, each chapter takes the reader through the embodied accounts of alternative worldmaking. The accounts of fire dreams woven through a tapestry of resistance and hope problematise the white supremacist racial and capitalist structures that have produced unfair worlds and seek to destroy any project of justice. From AIDS safety and prevention programmes, harm reduction programmes, resistance to the dispossession of people/communities by the state-corporate nexus, from the work with people left out of disaster relief and rehabilitation to the struggle against racialised-gendered-sexual sex offender criminalisation, WWAV fought with and for the marginalised people through grassroot mobilisations, provision of services, and legal and policy advocacy. The book provides a brilliant

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exploration of the affective, physical, legal, archival, social, and historically situated community-based solidarity. It illuminates the strategies, the labour and the infrastructures of feeling required to dream, realise, and manifest the possibilities of a world otherwise at the grassroots, legislative, and policy levels.

*Fire Dreams* is an account of Black feminist ‘theory on the ground’ resisting the racial capitalist playbook: isolate, blame, criminalise, destabilise, erase, and take. The book allows us to witness how this racial capitalist playbook functions in development processes, projects of disaster relief, disease control involving state and corporations and extractive academic knowledge production. Guided by the historically situated black feminist values of ‘solidarity, respect, and care’ (p. 71) and working through the ‘intersections of art, protest, and scholarship’ (p. 106) WWAV engages in varied acts of collective resistance against white-supremacist, settler-colonial and racial capitalist violence, dispossession and disenfranchisement. The book describes how WWAV generated its own counter playbook in their resistance and ‘theory on the ground’, in actions of accomplice, refusal, otherwise, and speech. The book presents an account of lived intersectionality on the ground as WWAV *worked across movements and across scales* to knit together the work of anti-criminalisation, reproductive justice work, anti-violence and harm reduction.

Rooted in the politics of intersectionality and solidarity, the project understands intersectionality as the varied subject positions marked by differences of race, gender, class, and sexuality at the centre of resistance against white settler colonial racial capitalism. It also frames intersectionality through the lens of interlocking systems of oppression – including capitalism, racism, sexism, colonialism, Christianity, bureaucracy, policing, and academic knowledge production – that collectively wreak havoc on Black lives and communities.

The book is divided into five chapters along with an introduction and an epilogue. It follows a nonlinear, embodied writing style that challenges the linear, masculine, colonial knowledge production, which I will proceed to outline.

Chapter one, entitled ‘Front Porch Strategy,’ provides an account of how resistance against white supremacist violence emerged through the community driven action literally on the front porches of Black women’s houses. Front porches were intimate relational spaces where strategies for resistance, care of communities and dreams of alternative worldmaking were nurtured historically by Black women and that WWAV used as a methodological tool for the collective production of knowledges rooted in the lives of people. The embeddedness of the place of world-making in the liminal spaces of ‘front porches’, the in-between spaces existing in the ‘interstices between home and street, between public and private, between collective and intimate’ (p. 43), disturbs the abstract methodological spaces of traditional qualitative inquiries. By locating the front porch as the historical and ongoing crossroads in and through which Black women have fostered and cultivated revolutionary resistance against white supremacist violence and surveillance in the USA, the authors unpack the situatedness of theory on the ground (rather than seeing them as metaphors of liminality and crossroads, which is the prevalent attitude in the qualitative traditions). In doing so, they also break the linear narratives by intertwining the present, future and past into each other. The present interrupts and provokes the oppressions and resistances of the past, while the future dreams and past sacrifices guide the everyday lives of alternative worldmaking in the present.

Chapter two, titled ‘Doing the Work’, details the history of what doing the actual work of radical activism entails and how WWAV roots itself in the community, supports each other and narrates the stories of doing the work. One of the important insights for researchers in this chapter is how WWAV dismantles the spatial and intellectual distances between theory and the field. Unlike colonial, masculine knowledge-making – which confines theory to books and intellectual rumination within university spaces, treating lives and communities as mere fields for testing and verification – WWAV produces knowledge with the community, in the community, and for the community. By dismantling distinctions between researcher and researched, theory and empirics, theoretical development and community betterment, they provide support to marginalised communities and create knowledge aimed at producing alternative, just, and liveable worlds.

Chapter three, entitled ‘We Spoke Our Truths’, provides a detailed insight into WWAV’s organising against the criminalisation of racial sexual minorities through the ‘crime against nature by Solicitation’ statute in the post-Katrina New Orleans. The chapter provides an analysis of the co-constitution of settler colonialism and chattel slavery through predatory policing and through the criminalisation of peoples (particularly Black cisgender and trans women) and it narrates the journey of the fight against this criminalisation and of its success. The chapter details the work done simultaneously on multiple fronts, including providing immediate services to members/communities at risk, strategising and communicating with communities, and organising support for challenging institutional structures enabling intimate, communal, and structural violence against specifically targeted racialised, sexualised, and poor communities.

Chapter four, entitled, ‘Working with Fire’, lays out what and how alternative worldmaking with and through fire stoked by love and honouring differences means. It elaborates on the malleability of love as a destructive or generative force in the backdrop of the white supremacist attempts to exterminate WWAV through fire and on WWAV’s resurrection from its ashes, to continue brewing the fire dreams of producing more liveable futures. This

chapter describes how working with fire is rooted in building relationships, making spaces and on the refusal of linear time. Building relationships is practiced as a way of developing ‘thick solidarity’ (p. 133) that ‘honours difference’ (p. 133) to work together in changing the conditions fostering violence. Making space involves recognition of the situated histories of violence and the artificial division created by racial capital-colonial systems that link the resistance movements across different boundaries of space. Refusing linear time entails working with past, present and future simultaneously to produce alternative futures. Rooted in Black feminist infrastructures of feeling, such non-linear temporality provided WWAV with the strength to blow ‘on these otherwise embers that filled our present, so that they could catch, ignite, and set new and more liveable futures afire.’ (p. 135)

Chapter five, entitled ‘The Grounds’, continues with the work of rebuilding, resistance, and organising community. The chapter outlines how ‘personal is political’ is lived and how alternative futures are fabulated in and through the daily praxis of alternative worldmaking. The chapter brings the story back to the front porch as the revolutionary ground for solidarity, love and community.

This book outlines how WWAV fought and continues to fight this struggle with limited means. It captivates the reader’s affective and imaginative senses and offers invaluable lessons on how to fight collectively and how to generate knowledge for emancipation and mobilise one’s speech for the marginalised. The book intricately details the geographies, histories, psychologies, sociologies, policies and politics of oppression as well as alternative world-making. It reveals how oppression reproduces itself through structural and interconnected devastations that cannot be captured through disciplinary traditions working in silos – and how insurrections are nourished and made possible ‘through everyday forms of sabotage and subterfuge’ (p. 46) in the face of constant surveillance, policing, and violence.

*Fire Dreams* shows how alternative world-making is accomplished with people, with communities, and through the spaces one inhabits and makes one’s own. It shows how to protect histories that guide us in dismantling racial capitalist playbooks of violence that keep reassembling in different forms in each generation. The book advocates for tethering oneself in communities, relationships, solidarities, visions of possibilities and hope to produce alternative worlds. It is an essential read for activists and scholars in gender studies, social movement studies, critical organisation studies, critical theory and anyone working toward or seeking ways to produce alternative worlds. The work and struggles of WWAV resonate with the Dalit movements against caste oppression in India (Levien, 2013; Prasad, 2022), Palestinian resistance against settler genocidal violence and dispossession (Alqaisiya, 2022; Khalidi, 2020) and the colonial racial capitalist projects of developmentalism and disasterisation across the global Souths (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Rivera, 2022). This book particularly reminded me of *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy in showing how fire is used in organised caste violence in India.

Critiquing such a profound project is challenging precisely because fighting white settler colonial racial capitalism is an immensely difficult endeavour. However, I would like to suggest that the book may have benefited from developing more intimate connections with the struggles of other marginalised communities across the globe. Doing so would have provided better grounds for developing transnational solidarity in resisting oppressions, which are relationally interconnected as well as employ similar tactics. The book points towards struggles at other places; however, it remains fundamentally rooted in the United States. I wish the book had engaged more with the transnational struggles that are working against marginalisation in their situated contexts as well as against USA-based direct and indirect imperial domination. This would have been especially relevant as *expansion* into ‘new territories’ has been and continues to be part of racial capitalist playbook: isolate, blame, criminalise, destabilise, erase, take, and expand. Problematising and theorising *expansion* as part of the racial capitalist playbook is essential for studying the transnational extractivist design of racial capitalism. Doing so would have also enabled producing and strengthening new grounds for transnational solidarities in resistance and alternative worldmaking movements.

Beyond its scholarly contributions, the book ignites a fire within the reader—a call to engage in the collective endeavour of shaping more just and liveable futures. It reminds us that alternative worlds are not just dreamt but actively built through solidarity, resilience, and unwavering commitment to justice. *Fire Dreams* is a testament to the power of community in resisting oppression.

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