

Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro, eds., *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left is a collection of memoirs written by children whose parents were members of or affiliated with the American Communist Party. The editors, Linn Shapiro and Judy Kaplan, previously collaborated on *Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left*, the edited transcripts of two conferences held at the World Fellowship Center in Conway, New Hampshire during the summers of 1982 and 1983. A selection of presentations from the 1982 conference appeared in *Radical History Review* in 1984.

The contributions to *Red Diapers* not only enable an understanding of previously unexplored aspects of the history of the Communist Party in the United States, such as the role of children in the movement, but also address broader issues such as how political values are conveyed across generations. Weighted heavily on the memoirs of Cold War red diaper babies, the collection documents a largely neglected aspect of this era of repression against political activists on the Left.

Numerous memoirs written by red diaper babies have been published in recent years, including *Un-American Activities: A Memoir of the Fifties* by Sally Belfrage (1994), *Red Diaper Baby: Three Comic Monologues* by Josh Kornbluth (1996), and *The View from Alger's Window: A Son's Memoir* by Tony Hiss (1999), among others. In contrast to these individual narratives, Kaplan and Shapiro's collection functions as a kind of "collective memoir," a term used by Angela Davis in her commentary on the back cover. According to the editors, the common themes among the contributions include: the centrality of left-wing politics to everyday life; an oppositional identity; a heightened historical awareness; a feeling of connection to an international community of people working for social change; and a belief that one's personal actions can make a difference and that by working together people can radically change society. (9)

While I would suggest that these "common themes" are shared by some contributors and not others, there are clearly significant differences between the experiences of red diaper babies, which are related to numerous factors including class, race, religion, and geography. Another element which distinguishes the experiences of these individuals is the historical moment in which they came of age. This is implicitly suggested by the predominance of contributions by children who grew up during the early Cold War era in the section of the book which focuses on the political persecution of Communists.

Red Diapers contains almost fifty contributions by red diaper babies¹ and is divided into three thematic sections: "Family Albums," in which the contributors describe their daily lives growing up; "Political Trauma as Personal History," which specifically focuses on the effects of red-baiting on

the children of Communists; and “Claiming our Heritage,” in which contributors explore the impact of their “left-wing political legacy.” (5) The historical groupings of the red diaper babies include children of European immigrants active in left-wing politics during the first two decades of the twentieth century, in addition to those who came of age in mid-century, as well as the children of 1960s activists. Although there is some inclusion of red diaper babies from New England, the mid-Atlantic states, and the South in the collection, a significant number of contributors grew up in four urban centers — New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. The collection is weighted heavily on the experiences of white Communist children, and includes little representation of the experiences of African-Americans, and excludes entirely the experiences of Mexican-American and Japanese-American red diaper babies.

While the Communist Party’s base of support was primarily rooted in urban centers, their membership was more racially and ethnically diverse than is reflected in these essays. Robin Kelley writes in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990) that the “...prevalence of blacks in the CP earned it the epithet ‘nigger party’ throughout the South,” while Mark Naison, who authored *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (1983), writes that “...over 2,000 African Americans were members of the Harlem CP during the Popular Front years (1935-39).”² While there were also a significant number of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles who belonged to the CP, it is also, in the words of Mexican-American activist Burt Corona, important to understand that a strong relationship existed between Mexican American activists and the Communist Party in the 1930s.³ Before the Communist Party expelled Japanese-American members around the time of Pearl Harbor there had been a significant number of Japanese-Americans in the CP, primarily on the West Coast. In San Francisco Japanese-Americans CP members published a semimonthly publication, *Rodo Shimbun* (The Japanese Worker), which was later retitled *Doho* (Brotherhood) during the Popular Front period and produced out of Los Angeles.⁴

One of the most significant themes in the collection is the degree to which these red diaper babies “become their parents’ children.” (2) The construction of political identity, and the “passing on” of left-wing traditions are of central importance to many who contributed to *Red Diapers*. In the first section, the essays focus on the relationships between red diaper babies and their parents, as well as their experiences with left-wing cultural, political, and educational institutions at distinct historical moments throughout the twentieth century. What is particularly striking about reading these recollections together is that the degree to which red diaper babies embrace their parents’ political beliefs appears to rely primarily on their relationship with their parents rather than on other factors, such as the children’s understanding of their parents’ politics. Parents who explained their political views, however, often had a closer

relationship with their children. Marge Franz, who grew up in Alabama during the 1930s, describes her father as “endlessly patient.” He was, according to Franz, “...full of child-friendly ideas in the John Dewey-progressive education mode prevalent in the 1920s: always explain in elaborate detail whatever you do or demand and expose your child to the widest variety of mind-expanding experiences in a hands-on way.” (45) As a result of her close relationship with her father and his interest and involvement in the Communist Party, Franz herself became engaged in left-wing political activity while she was a teenager. Alternatively, some Communist parents specifically withheld information about their political activities from their children in order to protect them, while others choose not to explain their activities. This frequently had a negative effect on their children, especially for those who came of age during the early Cold War era. As Miriam Zahler, who grew up during the 1950s, describes:

My mother must have thought she was shielding me from fear by keeping silent. But the unspoken and unexplained anxiety in our house was actually as harrowing as FBI agents at the door. In that pinched atmosphere, I had a sense of some unidentified, very grave, lurking peril, a feeling that took on a horrifying reality when the Rosenbergs were executed. (206)

By withholding information about their politics, Communist parents added to the feelings of confusion and anxiety experienced by red diaper babies in an era when Communists could be jailed or executed for their beliefs.

In contrast, children who grew up during the 1930s and 1940s, during the Popular Front period, were part of a “movement culture,” which gave them a sense of confidence and community. As Don Amter remembers, “Surrounded by our culture, our own little world, we formed a sub-society, particularly in New York, its many left-wing organizations, art and music groups, unions, local clubs and centers, and a thousand personal connections. It occurred to me with a shock one day that I could go from group to group and never come in contact with the ‘ordinary’ citizens of New York!” (241) Although she grew up in Alabama, Marge Franz spent the summer of her 13th year in New York. In her contribution to the collection, Marge shares memories of that summer, which was filled with political activity as well as her exposure to the culture of the Popular Front.

Red diaper babies who grew up during the early Cold War period did not have the experience of being part of a “movement culture.” In addition, during the Cold War era, there was an increase in repressive actions enacted by the U.S. federal government against the Communist Party. The Red Scare of the Cold War era had significant repercussions for the children of Communist parents. While the 1940 Smith Act made it illegal to “teach, advocate, or encourage the forcible overthrow of the U.S. government,” it was not until the

1950s that Communist Party members were convicted and jailed under the Act. In addition to seeing their parents jailed, red diaper babies were themselves followed by FBI agents, and pressured for information about their parents' political activity. Furthermore, many identified with Michael and Robert Meeropol, the orphaned sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

The middle section of the book, "Political Trauma as Personal History," on the effects of red-baiting on the children of Communists, specifically focuses on the red diaper babies who grew up in the late 1940s and 1950s, many of whom describe their feelings of separation and isolation from dominant U.S. society. Most of these individuals recollect leading "double lives," in the sense that the political world which encompassed their home life and "extracurricular activities," such as their participation in political groups, were distinct and separate from their school life. For example, these children often describe having to "pass" as average teenagers at school and with friends. In her essay "Proletaria and Me,"⁵ Dorothy M. Zellner, who as a teenager considered herself to be a "quasi-Bohemian," did not, in her words,

reveal my other life, my life in the Left, which contained a completely different set of people and activities. As a member of the Labor Youth League, I did things that the typical high-school student did not do: I went to "meetings," I attended "study groups" and "lectures" about the "principal questions of the day," and I went to "rallies" about the Rosenbergs or banning the H-bomb or against the House Un-American Activities Committee. This required some juggling: I couldn't actually say to my high-school friends that I was going to a meeting — what 15 year-old goes to meetings? I tried to deflect inquiries from friends about where I was going; if they really pressed me, I invented some boring and inconvenient family functions where my presence was mandatory. (88)

The fear of retribution for holding left wing political beliefs was strongly felt by the red diaper babies of the Cold War era. In one of the few contributions written by an African-American red diaper baby, Mary Louise Patterson describes living "two parallel lives." During the week Patterson remembers that she "went to school, socialized with my friends, and never let on that I was the offspring of the 'enemy within.'" (110) Meanwhile she spent weekends with her parents and other Communist Party families. She kept these aspects of her life separate because she "dreaded being 'found out'" whether it be by her school teachers or her friends. However, leading this kind of life created other problems for Patterson as she always "kept a certain safe distance and grew up with the fear of discovery, public denunciation, and rejection." (111) Leading a "double life" was difficult as red diaper babies of the Cold War era were frequently taught "lessons" in school that went against the political beliefs of their parents. Kim Chernin, whose mother was a foreign-born Communist leader, skipped her current events class as frequently as she could,

because in the class they were taught that “Reds were a menace.” (163) Her current events teacher applauded the arrest of “foreign” Communists, some of whom included friends of Chernin’s mother. Others, like Anna Kaplan, whose CP parents had gone underground, learned in school that “Communists were evil red devils trying to overthrow the government by force.” (225) Kaplan, who did not know that her parents were in the Communist Party, was frightened when she was eventually told of their membership because of what she had learned in school. This discrepancy, between the image of Communists as represented in her classes, and her own perception of her parents, led her to further question what she was taught in school.

To maintain this parallel existence, a number of contributors describe using different languages at home and at school. Dorothy Zellner explains that she used certain terms at school because “a slip of the tongue could give you away to some alert fascist-type teacher, who could torment you in class, flunk you, or report you to the principle as having ‘subversive ideas.’” While she was with her family or at Labor Youth League meetings she referred to the “Smith Act *victims*,” while at school she called them the “Smith Act *defendants*.” However, she used certain terms out of a sense of “political pride”:

I made sure to say “Negro” instead of “colored” and “Soviet Union” instead of “Russia.” I tried to avoid saying “Red China,” which was repeated so often it virtually became one word, but rather “China.” I substituted “Eastern Europe” for the term “Iron Curtain,” but I’m not sure I said the risky phrase “Socialist bloc.” (88)

More confrontational children of Communists would challenge their teachers on subjects such as the history of slavery in the United States, and on other topics upon which they disagreed.

Others managed to maintain some aspect of their parents’ political values while simultaneously conforming to dominant social codes of the 1950’s. Sisters Ros Baxandall and Harriet Fraad explain that as teenagers they “rebelled against conformity,” at the same time that they “strove to become popular and blend in.” (101) Diana Anhalt, who wanted to fit in at the American School in Mexico City, where her parents moved in the early 1950’s, remembers, “I could also relish my ability to shake the pillars of the American community — no enormous challenge — by delivering a speech in favor of racial integration for the American Legion oratory contest or by wearing too much lipstick.” (181) On the other hand, some red diaper babies rebelled against their parents by creating a different identity for themselves, which contrasted with that of their political parents. David Wellmen, who describes other children of Communists as “a pretty conformist bunch,” smoked pot, went drag racing, got into fights after school, violated Detroit’s curfew law, had sex in the back seat of cars, and almost flunked out of high-school. Others challenged their parents atheism by becoming more religious, such as Carl

Bernstein who “agitated for a Bar Mitzvah.” (200)

In addition to the “collective memoir” it presents, *Red Diapers* provides enlightening perspectives on the American Communist Party (CPUSA). For example, contributors suggest revealing ways in which Party members interpreted certain Party rules according to their own needs. Sirkka Holm, who grew up in the 1940’s, describes her parents’ resistance to a decision that Christmas should not be observed by CP members because “It was a commercial venture and only made the merchants richer and the people poorer.” (36) Holm later discovered that her parents had secretly bought Christmas gifts for her. It was not until forty years later that she told this story to a group of her friends from childhood who confided that they had the same experience with their own parents.

The contributions to the collection also highlight the role of women in Communist families. Unlike many families in the United States, a significant number of Communist women were the primary breadwinners, which allowed their husbands to hold important positions in the Communist Party. For example, Stephanie Allan’s mother supported the family while her father worked for a Communist Party newspaper. However, Communist Party women were frequently consigned to menial office tasks in their work for the Party, which is ironic considering that the majority of Party members were women.⁶ Mary Louise Patterson, whose mother supported their family, noticed that her mother performed clerical tasks at Party headquarters while her father attended meetings “behind closed doors” with other men. At the time, however, she “was too young to think about, much less question, the division of labor.” (112) Some contributors had mothers who were in the leadership of the CP, however, such as Kim Chernin’s mother Rose Chernin.

While *Red Diapers* provides new perspectives on some aspects of the American Communist Party, it has a number of shortcomings, most notably the limited range in its selection of contributors. The editors were aware of this when they noted in the introduction that “the experiences of the children of Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, and other immigrant groups that gave the CP its vitality remain to be told. Additionally, only a few African American families are represented here.” (5) The editors’ acknowledgment makes this absence all the more problematic, leading the reader to wonder by what criterion the editors made their selection. These absences severely limit the collections’ representation of the experiences of non-white red diaper babies, as well as the relationship between communities of colour and the Communist Party. In addition, the absence of people of colour in the collection perpetuates the stereotype of the CPUSA as a “white” organization which operated as an outside force in communities of colour. Alternatively, numerous historians, including Robin Kelly and Mark Naison, suggest that CP ideology was utilized by communities of colour to organize themselves politically.

Furthermore, the editors provide little in the way of an analysis of the lives

of red diaper babies. They state in their introduction that the project of the editor involves “selecting and ordering an anthology’s contents, composing an introduction, and commenting on individual articles,” in order to “help readers to recognize themes, patterns, continuities in discontinuities.” (6) While the editors highlight some shared themes among the contributions, they refrain from analyzing them in any in-depth manner. This decision may have evolved from Shapiro and Kaplan’s perspective that the contributions to the collection are “raw data.” (6) However, what is interesting and successful about the collection is the degree to which the essays make historical arguments that are both personal and political. What the collection lacks, however, is a more developed analytical framework which the editors failed to adequately provide. By not acknowledging and further developing their own analytical framework, the editors abdicate responsibility for that framework which creates certain problems in the way that the collection is structured. As such, the experiences of people of colour within the Communist Party is not satisfactorily addressed. While *Red Diapers* remains an important contribution, its shortcomings indicate how much more work is required in this area.

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¹ The phrase “red diaper baby” was used by communists to criticize others who “relied on birthright rather than their own efforts to move up in the party ranks.” (3).

² Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, N.C. 1990), 92. During its peak, in 1942, Party membership reached 85,000. Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas “Communist Party, USA” in Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana, Il. 1990), 152.; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York 1983), 279.

³ Mario R. Garcia, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley 1994), 126. Mexican-American activist Burt Corona was a leader of *El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Español* (The Spanish-Speaking Congress) in Los Angeles during the 1940s.

⁴ Yuji Ichioka “Japanese-Americans,” in Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana, Il. 1990), 388.

⁵ The title refers to a red diaper baby whose parents named her Proletaria. In her essay Zelinier mentions the unusual names of other red diaper babies, such as a set of male twins named Marx and Engels and a girl named Stalina. (88)

⁶ Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas “Communist Party, USA” in Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana, Il. 1990), 153.