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A Mosquito on an Elephant's Behind: The *Third World News Review* and Cedric and Elizabeth Robinson's Community Media

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Abstract

It is now a commonplace to assert that the US media offers a narrow and often misleading picture of global events. Its beholdenness to the Washington consensus and corporate interests is now broadly realized. But this was not so in 1980, when Cedric J. Robinson and Corey Dubin created the Third World News Review. Utilizing the radio station at the University of California, Santa Barbara, KCSB, 91.9 FM, they joined Elizabeth Robinson and many other students, staff, faculty members, and community activists to practice a form of community media that sought to destabilize official narratives of Western foreign policies in the Third World.

Asked about the creation of the long-running radio show *Third World News Review* (1980–2015), media activist and former KCSB station manager Elizabeth Robinson explained, “This is the age of Reagan. So everything we were doing was kind of the antithesis of the kind of media that was produced in commercial outlets nationally, etc. . . . I would say much of it would have been dismissed as ‘not objective’ by the dominant media paradigms, but we thought it was what we needed.”¹

This need was perhaps acutely felt due to the political turmoil that beset the United States and globe in that moment. In 1980, as activists

¹ Robinson, interview by author, January 27, 2021.

celebrated the independence of Zimbabwe, the Black Power movement in the United States reeled from external attack and inner contradictions. Its reimagination as a form of electoral politics had achieved, at best, uneven results. Black elected officials, it turned out, could enact racial violence too. At the same time, the openly white-supremacist political regime of South Africa continued to provide the most direct example of the harms made possible by the modern world-system. The apartheid government flexed its muscles through the continued repression of the liberation struggle, extending its military reach to neighboring countries. The US policy toward El Salvador and Nicaragua exposed the lies of the so-called Good Neighbor Policy. As did the US-backed Dirty War then devastating Argentina. As Israeli apartheid caused “security concerns” in Western Asia, the emergence of crises in Iran and Lebanon persisted. It was a time that revealed the impotence of politics as usual. Yet it was also a moment that demonstrated the complicity of media, through both silence and distortion, as it basically supported the dangerous policies of Western nations.²

Third World News Review was born to confront this world. Cohost Cedric J. Robinson was a native Californian who returned to the state around this time to direct the Center for Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Though he is known as the author of the monumental text *Black Marxism*, he wrote about topics as varied as Black intellectual history, film studies, and classical political theory. But perhaps just as critical, Cedric, and his wife, Elizabeth, were deeply involved in anti-imperialist thinking and work, which buttressed his research and teaching in Black Studies. The entire decade of the 1970s saw

² Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 139–60. Robin D. G. Kelley describes the moment of *Black Marxism*'s appearance as a “political crossroads,” an era in which “corporate wealth and callous disregard for the poor and people of color” led to an uncertain future for Black political organizing, stuck between an emergent cultural nationalism, the decline of the leftist organizing of the previous decade, and the structural difficulties facing Black politicians in the cities. See his foreword to *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xvii.

the Robinsons engaged in various activities from convening study groups in their home with graduate students to making appearances and organizing events with like-minded activists, which in many ways is the foundation of Black Studies—the closing of the gap between the academy and community. While both Cedric and Elizabeth had located their work in the academy—with the former having held positions at the University of Michigan and Binghamton, while the latter pursued a doctorate—in the end, their work would speak to matters beyond mere academic concerns. Media activism became one vehicle for the realization of these goals. This article is a reflection on the links between their jobs and their larger vocation, and how the latter was connected to their ability to leverage the university's resources for the common good.

When the Robinsons arrived in Santa Barbara in the late 1970s, Cedric joined a group known as the Black Action Committee, which focused on inequity in housing, education, and health care in the Black community, as well as Black unemployment, which in the 1980s routinely reached double-digit percentages. As one of several spokespeople for the group, he focused on racism within the city's mental health services, often appearing on local television to present their views.³ He was also a founding member of the Santa Barbara Coalition against School Fees, a member of the George Washington Carver Social Club, a board member of the local American Civil Liberties Union, and a member of Santa Barbarans against Apartheid. In the spring of 1979, he was invited by Assembly Member Teresa P. Hughes to speak before the California Assembly in support of legislation that would require advertisements for the sale of Krugerrands to carry information about the US arms embargo of South Africa's government.⁴ Southern Africa remained important to Cedric's conception of Black liberation. And though addressing the state directly in the halls of power could be meaningful, perhaps no arena was more critical to the Robinsons' activism than political communication geared directly to the people.

³ "Summary of Recent Work by the Black Action Committee," n.d. Cedric Robinson Papers (hereafter CRP); Cedric Robinson, curriculum vitae, 2001, CRP.

⁴ Teresa P. Hughes to Cedric J. Robinson, April 26, 1979, CRP.

It is now a commonplace to assert that the US media offers a narrow and often misleading picture of global events. Its beholdenness to the Washington consensus and corporate interests is now broadly realized. But this was not so in 1980, when Cedric and Corey Dubin founded the *Third World News Review*. Commenting to the University of California, Santa Barbara student newspaper on the creation of the show, Cedric stated, “Most news of Third World countries comes out of three or four sources, such as UPI, AP, or Reuters. Information gathering is highly concentrated, and the character of the news is distorted in several ways. The news becomes dramatic, a series of events, which in the end leaves one with the impression of chaos. This episodic coverage, tending to land on moments of violence, and disaster, means that Americans, unless well-traveled or having extensive private contacts, come away with an extraordinarily distorted world view. Our program is an attempt to deal with this.”⁵

A UCSB student and news director, Dubin was an important voice on a range of progressive issues during that period. The hemophilia with which he was born sensitized him to injustice. Drawn to leftist causes, Dubin was inspired early on to work on issues affecting Indigenous people. Two years prior to the launch of the show, he reported live from the Humqaq occupation, a protest against the construction of a liquified gas plant on native lands. It was Dubin who worked at the campus radio station, KCSB, where they would produce the show and who also possessed the technical skills to pull it off.⁶

If international crises were the motivations for developing the news program, settler colonial violence in South Africa was a primary area of concern. Though there was no push toward divestment on many US campuses at this point, a librarian at UCSB named Peter Shapiro was deeply involved in this work. He sought out antiapartheid organizations after the massacre of protesting children in Soweto in June 1976, joining Campuses United against Apartheid. A union representative for

⁵ “KCSB Radio Program Attempts to Present Third World Perspective,” *Daily Nexus*, November 14, 1980.

⁶ “Corey S. Dubin, 1955–2017,” *Santa Barbara Independent*, February 2, 2017.

librarians, he cohosted, with Neil Sinclair, the short-lived *South African Perspectives*, also broadcast on KCSB to counter the “official” narratives coming from Pretoria. As Shapiro told the campus *Daily Nexus*, in the midst of efforts to “broaden our base,” he decided to combine efforts with Cedric Robinson and Dubin to produce the new show.⁷

Then there was Elizabeth Peters Robinson. The child of Lebanese American parents, she was born in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and later moved to East Texas and then to California. As an undergrad at Berkeley, she became interested in radical approaches to criminology. That interest led her to work as a counselor at the Alameda County Probation Office, where she met Cedric. After their marriage in 1967, they lived in the Bay Area for several years before spending a year in England. Her background and travels inspired an interest in the Middle East. While Cedric was returning stateside to take his job at the University of Michigan, she took a trip to Lebanon. By the late 1970s, coverage of the Iran hostage crisis became nightly political theater. But it did not jibe with reality. The Robinsons’ Iranian contacts shared direct experiences that greatly differed from the ways the situation was being depicted daily on *Nightline*. As someone who had devoted her academic career to the Middle East, it was both logical and appropriate that those concerns brought Elizabeth to the show as a regular host and the first woman.⁸

Although formally under the aegis of the university regents, the radio station and thus *Third World News Review* was technically independent. And necessarily so, for the Reagan era was one where consent on questions of foreign policy was manufactured in unprecedented ways. Alternative and independent media were one way to address the ignorance that led ordinary Americans to accept that the corporate media’s enemies were also theirs and that the people the state marked as abhorrent truly deserved the annihilation the military meted out. Then, as is true now, corporate and mainstream media acted as a kind of hegemon and had achieved an easy consensus among the public by simply limiting

⁷ “KCSB Radio Program.”

⁸ Elizabeth Robinson, “Twenty-Five Years of the *Third World News Review*,” *Race and Class* 47 (October–December 2005): 78.

what could be known. In explaining the necessity of their work, Cedric asserted that “the more people know about international needs and desires, the less likely they will be manipulated into convenient hostilities.”⁹ But these activities were also connected to his intellectual work. If one reads closely the ideas of *The Terms of Order* on the nature of political leadership and order, as well as the recovery of traditions of resistance to that order which dominate the pages of *Black Marxism*, we see, as Elizabeth describes, a through line of “looking for what’s not covered and what’s erased or buried” that animates both Cedric’s scholarship and work in community media.¹⁰

Yet even in independent media spaces, such as campus newspapers and television, universities have been known to intervene when their interests are in play. There is no guarantee of academic freedom. Of course, the University of California had a long history of such struggles with academic freedom and student and faculty censorship, some of which Cedric had experienced firsthand.¹¹ Fortunately, none of this impacted the *Third World News Review*, which according to Elizabeth, the regents assumed no one listened to.¹² In its early years, the show widely covered the “hot zones” of the Cold War, such as southern Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, and the Middle East. Had the regents been paying attention, they would have noticed a challenge to a political status quo that regarded US foreign policy as necessary to the success of US capitalism. Composed entirely of volunteers from both the UCSB student body and faculty, many of whom had little to no media experience, the program’s hosts used foreign newspapers found in the university library to highlight stories from international perspectives not previously vetted by White House or Pentagon officials. One pool of volunteers came from undergraduate students in the Third World Coalition. Extremely active on campus, this group demonstrated a ready interest in resisting the unjust practices of US foreign intervention. In a letter to the *Daily Nexus*,

⁹ “KCSB Radio Program.”

¹⁰ Robinson, interview.

¹¹ See Joshua Myers, *Cedric Robinson: The Time of the Black Radical Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021).

¹² Myers, *Cedric Robinson*.

published just days before the same paper announced the creation of the *Third World News Review*, the group asserted,

It is the view of the Coalition that U.S. intervention takes many forms, direct and indirect, economic, political, and military—and we oppose them all. We support the Third World liberation movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. We support their right to rid themselves of the menace of the multinational corporations (El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Chile and Brazil for example). We support their right to struggle against political machinations such as the Camp David treaty. And we support their right to defend themselves against military intervention and repression by surrogates for the U.S. We refer to Israel, South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, El Salvador, and Saudi Arabia among many others.¹³

It helped that some of these students were natives of the areas that the show covered.

Another pool came from faculty who had both interest and concerns in particular areas. For instance, Cedric's Black Studies colleague and close friend Gerard Pigeon, a scholar of French literatures, covered issues focused on and in the Black francophone world. This practice of inviting hosts to speak to the collaborations across differing levels of expertise was an intentional one that the Robinsons and Dubin promoted and developed over the life of the show. Hosts fluent in non-English languages offered valuable translations from press clippings from around the world. And though it was not a breaking news show (sometimes those newspapers and magazines took days or weeks to arrive), the information provided represented ongoing issues, ones that had long shelf lives, as it were. Over the first few years, the episodes packed many different areas of interest into one show. Broadcast every week, the hour was sometimes filled with eight to ten speakers providing quick glimpses of the goings-on in their respective regions. The model was akin to the pamphleteering practices popular in the era, where one could get a quick rundown of the pertinent facts and then decide whether to pursue a deeper knowledge. But though it gave the participants valuable skills and the listeners myriad

¹³ "Letters: Meeting," *Daily Nexus*, October 29, 1980.

perspectives around the globe, this method left very little time for analysis or commentary about the meaning of events or issues.¹⁴ As the years unfolded, the format expanded, and new opportunities arose, more editorial content would come.

Radio had long been an important form for radical and progressive news.¹⁵ In fact, Cedric believed early on that it had advantages over television: "In many ways, radio is a counterbalance to TV as a medium of information. It's cheaper, more accessible, and at this time, with the networks becoming more and more dependent on government information, committee reports, press releases, people are being deceived by television."¹⁶ Whether or not those views held in the ensuing years, the Robinsons would soon be invited to bring their perspectives beyond KCSB.

The events surrounding the US military presence in Lebanon and the invasion of Grenada three years later were clear instances where this kind of media activism proved necessary.¹⁷ The bombing of the military barracks of US and French peacekeepers by sectarian forces on October 23, 1983, brought the issue directly to US television sets. Many viewed Reagan's deployment of troops as reckless. But it was the logic of colonial imposition that created the recklessness.¹⁸

In Grenada, the New Jewel Movement, led by Maurice Bishop, had represented the vibrancy of Black radical organizing and its possibilities in the achievement of state power. According to Cedric, the Grenada of the New Jewel Movement's dreams necessitated a withdrawal from the world-system and from British and US economic interests, and the creation of an economy for its people.¹⁹ Two years later, seizing an

¹⁴ Robinson, interview.

¹⁵ Matthew Lasar, *Pacifica Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ "KCSB Radio Program."

¹⁷ "Panthers Host Meeting Talking U.S. Aggression," *Daily Nexus*, January 9, 1984.

¹⁸ Tom Najem, *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society* (London: Routledge, 2012), 34–42; Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, 114.

¹⁹ "Grenada: What the White House Hides," *Santa Barbara News and Review*, November 10, 1983; "Jesse Jackson's World," *Washington Post*, December 29, 1983.

opportunity created by internal fracture and a power struggle that led to Bishop's execution, Reagan authorized an invasion by several thousand troops under the pretext of rescuing American medical students. They arrived two days after the bombing in Lebanon. Dubbed Operation Urgent Fury, the killings of ordinary Grenadians defending their homes were celebrated by the American press. And condemned internationally.²⁰

Cedric and others in Black and radical communities condemned the invasion too. Three days after the operation, he published an editorial in the *Daily Nexus* that placed the invasion within a long history of US aggression in the region, dating back to the Monroe Doctrine. But it was also contextualized by a Reagan administration that continued to operate "unchecked." This invasion was not its first. It had been preceded by similar actions in El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Sudan, Chad, and Libya. Cedric highlighted the ominous pattern to demonstrate that as a "media event" the true costs in human lives of the invasion would be wished away. For there were "men and women who have convinced themselves that the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the gambling with millions are necessary concomitants for the world they intend to have." A true accounting of events was required to "discipline" this administration, lest the "fractures" it created become "chasms."²¹ Two weeks later, in an interview with the *Santa Barbara News and Review*, Cedric offered more extensive commentary on the background of the Grenadian revolution, the ways the media was manipulated by the Reagan administration in its coverage, and the cautious next steps that were sure to be taken in the invasion's aftermath. His view that the invasion was explicitly "racist" and should be taken up by Democratic presidential hopefuls was heeded most consistently and acerbically by Jesse Jackson. Perhaps most problematic to Cedric was the fact that Ronald Reagan's administration was an "insult to learning, to intelligence, to historical consciousness."²²

²⁰ "U.S. Vetoes U.N. Resolution 'Deploring' Grenada Invasion," *New York Times*, October 29, 1983; Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, 114–15.

²¹ Cedric Robinson, "Running Unchecked," *Daily Nexus*, October 28, 1983.

²² "Grenada: What the White House Hides." For more, see Audre Lorde, "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," *Black Scholar* 15 (January–February 1984): 21–29; and

In order to resist the violence of US empire, an alternative media was more necessary now, than ever.

After speaking at a rally—Elizabeth on Lebanon and Cedric on Grenada—the Robinsons were approached by June Sunderland about expanding to public access television. Sunderland was part of a group including UCSB sociology professor and radical scholar Richard Flacks that was pushing Cox Communications to support a public access television station. The Robinsons agreed to support the effort, given that this particular model meant that there would be no one telling them what to do or “mess with their content.”²³ The television version of *Third World News Review* quickly became a critical source of information for Santa Barbarans “hungry for critical media.”²⁴ Though there were no official numbers, they were clearly reaching more people by using television. Cedric and Elizabeth, as well as others who appeared on the show, were often recognized in the streets. They could not go out to the movies without being stopped. They were, as Elizabeth remembered, hailed “from skip loaders, parking attendants would ask about the show, people would stop us on the street, almost all of them wanting to know more—and a few wanting us to go away!”²⁵

In the meantime, the radio show continued. The format began to include more and more voices. More scholars joined a new generation of hosts. Elizabeth estimates that approximately thirty people contributed regularly as hosts over the life of the program. All were volunteers, including the crew and producers like director of the show, Beth Anderson. Their relationship to the university remained one minimally attached to the resources of the radio station and library. But *Third World News Review* was also an escape route for students who wanted to deepen their knowledge and awareness of the larger world. Most important, the show’s content and coverage was “movement-driven.”²⁶

Tony Martin, *In Nobody’s Backyard: The Grenada Revolution in Its Own Words*, 2 vols. (Westport, CT: Majority, 1985).

²³ Robinson, interview.

²⁴ Robinson, “Twenty-Five,” 80.

²⁵ Robinson, “Twenty-Five.”

²⁶ Robinson, interview.

Throughout the run of *Third World News Review*, Cedric's teaching and research interests dovetailed with these concerns. In a 1982 review in *Race and Class*, he continued to link US media to imperialist interests — this time through an analysis of film. Corporate America had a vested concern in maintaining not simply the appearance of colonialism but also the Cold War political arrangements that necessitated it. Films like *Indiana Jones* made these links visible.²⁷ Hollywood would simultaneously produce depictions of the “domestic enemy” that extended the logics of the more visible negative imagery of the minstrel show. This more subtle version of racist imagery and storytelling, seen in Blaxploitation and the depictions of Black women in 1980s films, was more evidence of how the media supported and underpinned neoliberal assumptions about Black life.²⁸ These concerns developed into a longer study, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, published in 2007, where Cedric outlined that power constructed the Other and created regimes of truth he called “the racial regime.” This regime gave a measure of credence and financial support to the media, which would then deem these Others as inferior and in need of civilization.²⁹

His classes and commentary on these connections found Cedric engaged in reading such media events as the Jesse Jackson campaigns, the Rodney King “pavement lynching,” and the Anita Hill hearings as part of the critical evolution of the racial regime in the 1990s.³⁰ All were consequential to a moment where the punditry ranted and raved about

²⁷ Cedric J. Robinson, “Indiana Jones, the Third World, and American Foreign Policy,” *Race and Class* 26 (October 1984): 83–91.

²⁸ Cedric J. Robinson, “Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation,” *Race and Class* 40 (July 1998): 1–12; Cedric J. Robinson, “Black Women in American Films,” *Elimu* 8 (Fall 1993): 1–3.

²⁹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³⁰ Cedric J. Robinson, “White Signs in Black Times: The Politics of Representation in Dominant Texts,” in *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. H. L. T. Quan (Pluto, 2020), 185–86; Cedric J. Robinson, “Race, Capitalism, and the Antidemocracy,” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 73–81.

“political correctness.” But for Cedric, “the real world of political correctness” was the US attempt to make police brutality, war, empire, and capitalist exploitation part of the normative order of things. As if it were a social contract.³¹ This biting analysis would be extended from the classrooms and academic journals to the KCSB airwaves.

The 2000 republication of *Black Marxism* sparked renewed engagement with Cedric Robinson’s work. This engagement has not been limited to the academy. Organizers and activists have found value in understanding the Black Radical tradition and in reading his books. But as he would say, the subjects that he thought and worked on were hardly exhausted. In October 2015, the *Third World News Review* aired its final episode. Cedric died the following June. But there is an archive. If there is something to learn in his written works, then much of this archive is also essential, for it sheds light on Black and Third World perspectives with regard to much of the major imperialist activity of the neoliberal era. In the years of tapes, we find the extension of the work of an activist—work that began in his teenage years—and more lessons than we could possibly name.

This likely would not have happened without a partnership. In that sense, Elizabeth Robinson’s philosophy of community media is a critical piece of this legacy. As the 1980s closed, her responsibilities expanded as she became a station manager at KCSB. The station became a haven for students facing challenges and crises both on campus and beyond, such as the antiapartheid movement, the ethnic studies strike, and the Persian Gulf War.³² When Dubin left the station, she took over his role, hosting a weekly morning show called *Viewpoints*, which the Robinsons’ student and friend H. L. T. Quan soon joined as a cohost. Inspired by the increased activism around the carceral state and police brutality in the mid-1990s, Cedric suggested “how about *No Alibis?*” when it was decided that *Viewpoints* needed a new name.³³ Though she retired from her position as

³¹ Cedric J. Robinson, “The Real World of Political Correctness,” *Race and Class* 35 (January 1994): 73–79.

³² Marisela Marquez, interview by author, August 9, 2020.

³³ Marquez, interview.

manager in 2012, *No Alibis* continues, hosted by Elizabeth and a number of weekly contributors—a continuing legacy of the community media project that started over forty years ago.

Delivering a talk at the International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy in Montreal in 2011, Elizabeth Robinson argued that the corporate “media generally pay little attention to social responsibilities, much less any notion of solidarity, as they gobble one another up attempting to consolidate ownership in ever fewer hands. In this sector the blurring of lines between corporate and government means that media are not only increasingly enclosed but that they are partnering with or controlling government surveillance of the people whom they should inform and serve.” Therefore, community media will be increasingly necessary in cultivating “an imaginary and a practice of social and solidarity economies.”

As corporate media and social media companies are threatening to monopolize our attention, we would do well to heed this warning to remember and focus on the local. As she writes, “We are dependent on our communities for solidarity in both directions.”³⁴

If we are so dependent, we must never waver in telling our truths. We must also “refrain from telling lies,” as Cedric Robinson once asserted.³⁵ We cannot lie about the work that we have to do to undo this system of exploitation and violence, framed by racial order, buoyed by material greed. Any freedom worth fighting for involves inhabiting a world totally free of these conditions at minimum. Political struggles to ensure academic freedom are at the core of how we make space for these truths. And Black Studies must remain at the core of those conversations. Because of the Robinsons’ work, so much of that project is now clearer, if not easier. Each element of our work is, as Elizabeth Robinson characterized their media activism, a “mosquito on an elephant’s behind.” But that is

³⁴ Elizabeth Robinson, “Community Media in US,” talk delivered at International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy, Montreal, October 17, 2011.

³⁵ Cedric Robinson, comments at “Radical Thought: Toward Critical Social Theories and Practice,” University of California, Santa Barbara, November 6, 2004.

how “resistance starts[,] . . . with tiny bites that nourish imagination and audacity.”³⁶

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³⁶ Robinson, “Twenty-Five,” 80.