

Black Women's Voices

A Shining Thread of Hope:

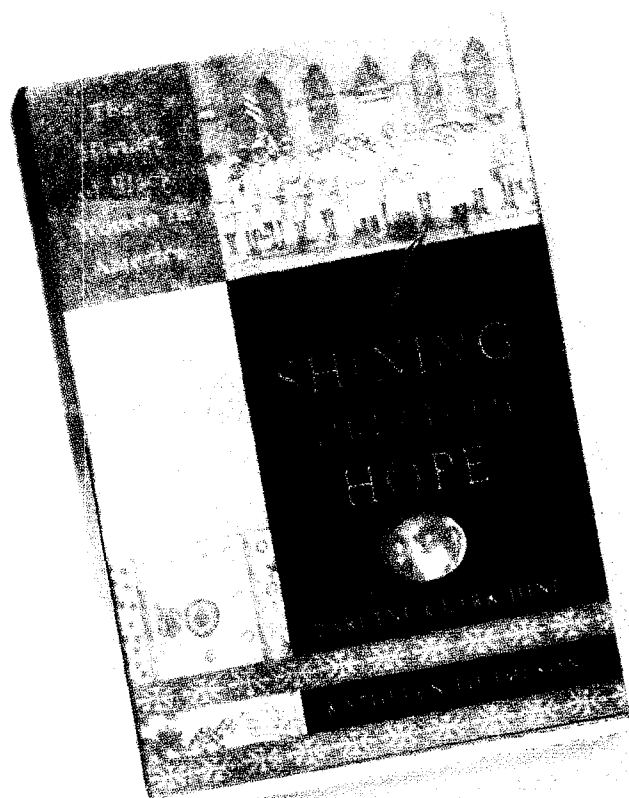
The History of Black Women in America

By Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson

Broadway Books

355 pages, \$27.50

REVIEWED BY NELL IRVIN PAINTER



From time to time, a work of history itself makes history. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson is such a book, marking a giant step toward a more encompassing portrait of our nation's past. The first general history of African-American women, it signals the blossoming of a new field.

In the '70s, American history textbooks began to take account of the field of black history. In the '80s, women's history began being added to the mix. Now, in the '90s, we are witnessing the emergence and acceptance of a field that had not previously existed: black women's studies, including black women's history. To my mind, the changes have been for the good, for they have made it difficult to ignore the injustice and oppression, as well as the long-neglected experiences and contributions, that are as much part of our national past as our dearly prized democracy and individual equality.

Why is this process so recent? Historians, of course, do not have to belong to the group they write about. But usually

they do, especially when a field is just emerging and still lacks academic prestige. As a result, the development of black women's history had to wait for historians who are black women to produce the books that influence textbooks. Once black women became respected historians, they could write surveys of their own. Among the pioneers of black women's history in the '70s, Darlene Clark Hine has made some of the finest contributions.

To a great degree, Hine herself—through her groundbreaking scholarship—created the market for a general history of black women. In her now-classic body of work—including the magnificent two-volume reference work, *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, which she co-edited with Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Elsa Barkley Brown—she has set the pace for this new discipline.

Now Hine and Thompson—who helped write and edit *Black Women in America*—are reaching out to a wider audience of students and general readers. They will succeed, for this new history bears their stamp in ways that make

it fresh as well as meaty. *A Shining Thread of Hope* introduces many unsung women, addresses readers invitingly, provides startling visual images and clearly illuminates the tragedies as well as the triumphs of African-American women. Let me say more about each of these strengths.

As any survey of African-American women must, *A Shining Thread of Hope* discusses the giants of black women's history—women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Rosa Parks. Hine and Thompson also deal with women who are well-recognized in the field of black women's studies but less well-known outside the academy, such as Maria W. Stewart, the early 19th-century lecturer, and Ella Baker, the brains and soul behind the civil rights movement of the '60s. These are important, even necessary contributions. But Hine and Thompson go on to introduce myriad unsung women of greatness: artists such as the gifted quilter Harriet Powers—whose sex, race and class deprived her of recognition during her lifetime—and civil

rights activists such as Anna Arnold Hedgeman, who tried in vain to have even just one black woman admitted to the podium of the March on Washington of 1963. Readers learn that hundreds of black women have made history, not just the most famous.

The authors invite readers into black women's history by speaking to us directly as "you." They also ask us to imagine ourselves in the situation of historical subjects. Because the particulars of so much early history is still lost or undiscovered, Hine and Thompson occasionally, and effectively, create composite characters—such as "Oni," an imagined African captive who survives the Atlantic Middle Passage and adjusts to enslavement in the New World—to give their story focus. This direct address and immersion works beautifully to break down barriers between historical subjects and readers.

This deeply informed history is brought to life by often-lyrical writing, such as the following passage on the slave trade:

Oni and the other women in that first ship were the first of thousands, tens of thousands, of black women who would be brought to labor in America. They

would live lives of sorrow and toil, separation and loss, and often desperate humiliation. They would also create a new culture in this new land. Weaving fragments of their African past with rags and threads from a new, alien world, they would dress themselves in dignity, love, and even joy.

The authors carefully detail the places where the experiences of black women diverged from those of black men. During slavery, they write, "Black women formed a subculture as a base from which they could protect themselves—against all white people, on the one hand, and against all men, on the other."

And the authors unearthed enough diaries, letters and oral histories to bring many women to life in their own words. Writing about black women who have migrated to the North, we hear from chiropractor Sarah D. Tyree in 1921: "I firmly believe in a womanly independence. Believe that a woman should be allowed to go and come where and when she pleases alone if she wants to, and so long as she knows who is right, she should not have to worry about what others think."

American readers, as members of a visual culture, appreciate scholarship

animated by illustrations. In this case, photographs and drawings are doubly precious, because we still run short of images of black women in everyday life. As though to remedy the scarcity, Hine and Thompson include three sections of photographs of workers, farmers, celebrities, artists, socialites, athletes, suffragists, protesters, musicians and mothers. There are photos of black Army nurses in World War II and of "Stagecoach Mary" Fields, who lived a free but rugged life in Montana and was Gary Cooper's childhood idol. These images feed a hunger for non-sensational visual images, bringing their subjects out of the realm of the unfamiliar and closer to readers.

Readers will also appreciate the high-quality design of this attractive book, in which each chapter opens with an exquisite photo. Careful thought has gone into all the chapter titles and headings, such as "Blossoming in Hard Soil," on the late 19th century, and "The Caged Bird Sings," evoking Maya Angelou, on the 1970s and '80s. Two of my favorite headings are "O, Ye Daughters of Africa," echoing Maria Stewart, and "Not Quite Free, Not Quite Wives," on enslaved paramours.

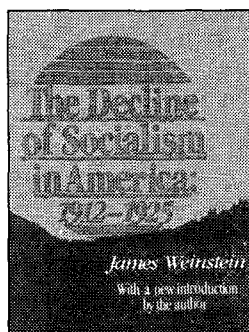
Perhaps the most difficult trick Hine and Thompson pull off is rendering a history that slights neither the hardships nor the achievements of black women. Quite rightly, they name law, custom and violence as black women's enemies and obstacles and show exactly what that meant. They are not saying black women had to break the law in order to live, but that American law, by codifying white supremacy and prejudice against women, worked to black women's detriment. Showing how black women have transcended unjust laws and worked to change them, Hine and Thompson also confirm a history larger than the sum of our oppression.

In short, *A Shining Thread of Hope* sets itself a daunting task and completes it brilliantly. It delivers a clear and elegant history of Americans who have known the worst of our society and yet produced some of its best exemplars. ■

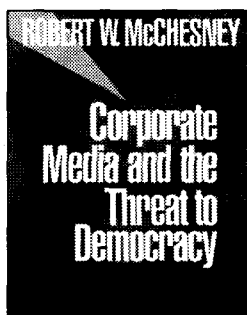
Nell Irvin Painter teaches history at Princeton University and is author of *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*.

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Workers Divided

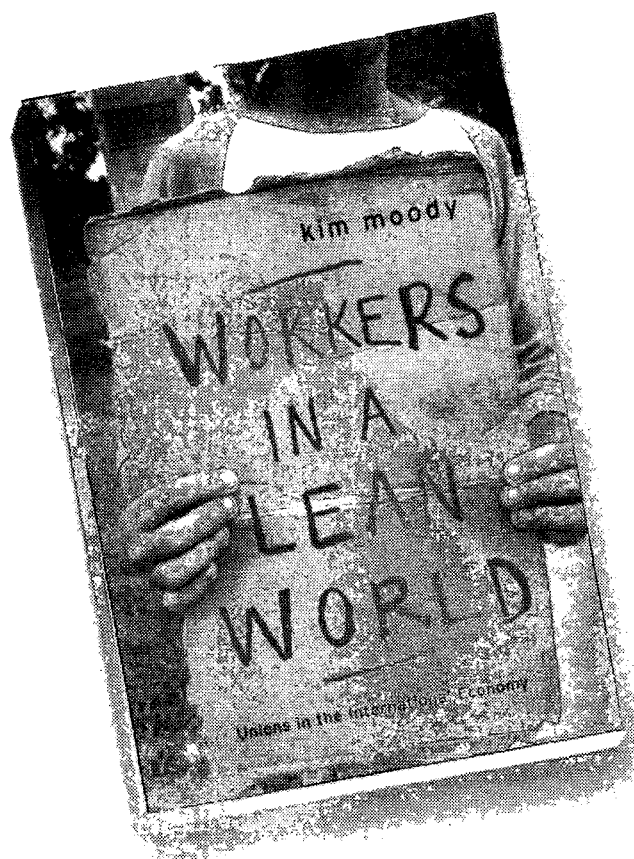
**Workers in a Lean World:
Unions in the International Economy**

By Kim Moody

Verso

342 pages, \$20

REVIEWED BY DAVID BACON



This fall, Italy's Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which leads the country's new government of ex-Communists, fought it out with their former comrades in the Refounded Communist Party (Rifondazione). The PDS proposed cutting social benefits and resisted measures to reduce high unemployment. The party equates Italy's survival with membership in the new European economic order, and has few qualms about making the required sacrifices to gain entry. While the votes of Rifondazione deputies keep the PDS in power, they refuse to join it, condemning its efforts to force Italian workers to swallow the bitter medicine of austerity.

These glaring fractures in Italy's left reflect growing divisions in working-class movements throughout Europe and beyond. "There is no Communist movement internationally anymore," says Ramon Mantovani, international affairs director of Rifondazione. "There are two lefts in Europe now. One accepts globalization, and wants to direct it. The other wants to leave that system, by reform or other means."

This new division of the left is one of the most important political characteris-

tics of our time, and will grow deeper and more permanent. In *Workers in a Lean World*, Kim Moody, director of the Detroit-based newsletter *Labor Notes*, speaks directly to the way neoliberalism and globalization have fractured the left. He analyzes and traces the roots of this division, assesses its impact on workers, and—most importantly—sees the beginnings of new working-class movements in response to it.

Most books about globalization these days are depressing, concentrating on the growing reach and integration of transnational corporations and their ability to bend political and economic policy to ensure greater profits. While many writers clearly see the human cost, most don't really believe workers can do much about it. Socialism is dead, after all. Ameliorating the worst effects of capitalism gone mad is about the best we can hope for, they say. Workers come off as victims, sometimes able to win small improvements but powerless to challenge the nature of the system.

Moody is more of an optimist but not unrealistic. He spends the first half of the book analyzing the growth and power of transnational corporations,

focusing in particular on the development of lean production systems. Not only are workers increasingly connected across borders by international production lines, but they are subjected to the same management methods for boosting productivity and controlling the workplace. Weakened and co-opted by team concept and total quality management techniques, unions at factories around the world are in crisis.

But Moody says that the basic problem of workers seeking social and economic justice is political, not economic. In the second half of the book—which looks at the politics of working-class internationalism—Moody makes a basic point ignored by most progressive analysts: No real challenge to the power of the transnationals is possible without first solving the political problems of workers movements.

In Moody's analysis, social democracy is failing workers. Whether it is the British Labour Party deciding not to reverse the privatization and anti-union legislation of Margaret Thatcher or Bill Clinton's campaign for NAFTA, the political parties built by working-class votes are abandoning workers to the