Q&A with Joanne Griffith, editor of Redefining Black Power

1) Q: Have conditions for blacks in the U.S. changed for the better during Obama's presidency?

A: I'll answer the question with another question; have conditions improved for anyone in the United States during the Obama presidency? Looking at statistics and anecdotal evidence, the answer has to be no. And while things have been difficult for society as a whole, African Americans particularly have struggled, especially when you look at indictors such as poverty, employment and education.

Figures released by the Census Bureau in November 2011 show that 49.1 million Americans are living in poverty. That's 16 percent of the population, a record high.

Within that group, minorities have been hit hard. 27 percent of African Americans live below the poverty line, followed by 26 percent of Hispanics. 36 percent of black children live in financially precarious situations, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Report.

Unemployment too, one of the main culprits when it comes to pushing families into poverty, remains high. When President Obama took office, the national unemployment rate was 7.6 percent. As we come to the close of 2011, 9 percent of Americans are out of work, with 15.1 percent of African Americans out of work, compared with 8 percent of whites and 11.4 percent of Hispanics.

When you look at education, one of the routes out of poverty and into future prosperity, the figures also make for grim reading; less than half of African American males graduate from high school.

There is further evidence that indicates the disadvantages suffered by African Americans; lack of access to healthcare in some areas and high incarceration rates, to name two.

However, one of the key points raised by all of the contributors in the book is that President Obama can not be held accountable as an individual for the specific problems facing black America. He inherited many of the issues and the president doesn't work alone; lawmakers are also responsible for addressing the nation's woes and putting policies in place to level the playing field for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. As individuals, we must also play our part. Black America may expect more of President Obama because of his heritage, but as Van Jones reminds us, the 2008 rallying cry was "yes we can" not "yes I can."

2) Q: What does the election of a black president mean for the future of civil rights?

A: Dr. Vincent Harding put it best when he said that "civil rights" is a narrow term. As he put it, we should be striving for the "expansion and deepening of democracy," engaging people in the political process to bring about social change and equality for all.

Using that definition, on the face of it, the election of a black president means little for the future of civil rights, or the "deepening of democracy." Speaking with Dr. Harding and others involved in the black freedom movement of the 50s, 60s and 70s, the goal was not to put a black man in the White House, but to level the playing field so that everyone had a chance to vote, to build economic stability, to live a healthy life and expand their knowledge through education.

However, the presence of Barack Obama, and certainly his 2008 presidential bid, brought African Americans into the democratic process in ways not seen before, encouraging blacks to exercise the civil rights people such as Fannie Lou Hamer fought for. Census bureau statistics again illustrate the point; the number of African

American voters aged 18–24 increased by 8 percent from the 2004 presidential election, and in states such as Maryland, South Carolina, Nevada, Ohio and Mississippi, black voter participation reached 70 percent; the national average for African Americans was 65 percent.

What we are seeing though, but not as a direct consequence of Obama's presence, is the rising up of voices via the Occupy movement. This movement, brought on by continuing economic troubles, joblessness and unhappiness over the government's bailing out of banks, is reviving the fight for civil rights, and while President Obama isn't responsible for this, how he reacts to the demands of the people may be what shapes future discussions around civil rights, or the deepening of democracy.

3) Q: How do you anticipate blacks voting in the 2012 election?

A: The excitement and activity that then-Senator Obama was able to generate in the 2008 election has gone. People are disillusioned and where it matters most, in the pocket, many are still hurting.

Congresswoman Maxine Waters spoke to the unemployment issue in the summer of 2011, making the point that if unemployment was as dire in the key voting state of Iowa as it is for African Americans, specific policies would be introduced to tackle the problem. Little has been done to rectify the financial inequalities specifically facing African American communities nationwide and if anything, people are worse off than they were in 2008.

We are seeing efforts now to tackle unemployment with President Obama's Jobs Act, but was it introduced too late? Healthcare was the policy du jour upon his arrival in the White House, but even though changes are slated for 2014, that won't be soon enough for black voters, or anyone else, to see a tangible difference in their lives and wallets before the polls close in November 2012.

The support is there, but President Obama will need to work even harder to win over voters this time around.

4) Q: What strategies might Obama employ to connect with the many African Americans who came out in support for him in 2008?

A: Even though social media was key to the Obama presidential campaign in 2008, he needs to get personal in 2012. Voters are hurting and disillusioned with the mantra of "hope" and "change."

Speaking with community organizers, intellectuals and educators for this project, there's a feeling that President Obama has lost his connection with African American voters, that he's not speaking their language. For example, there was a mixed response to the president's speech at the Congressional Black Caucus in September 2011 where he said it was "time to stop complaining." It's difficult to ask people to do this when they have no job, no home and no health insurance.

Voters need to believe in him again, to feel that they matter and their concerns will be acknowledged. President Obama's strength is his oratory skills, his ability to rise people up. He needs to get back to the grassroots, to listen to people and act on those worries. Slick words and campaign catchphrases won't work.

Also, his team needs to do a better job of highlighting the good work that has been achieved thus far. If we don't know what has been achieved, how do we know what to vote for?

With GOP hopefuls jockeying for position amid various controversies, at the moment at least, the 2012 election looks to be President Obama's to lose.

5) Q: Can you talk about your book project and goals?

A: The book portion of "Redefining Black Power" is just one part of a three pronged project which is the result of a partnership between the Pacifica Radio Archives and City Lights Books. For years the two organizations had been looking for a way to work together to showcase some of the key voices from history held in the vaults of the Pacifica archives, including Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. among many others.

Part one of the project was the creation of a radio documentary based on nationwide roundtable discussions with community organizers, activists, youth and concerned citizens who shared their memories of the 2008 campaign and hopes for the Obama presidency. All of the discussions featured "a voice from history" and examined how that person's work is still relevant today.

Part two is the book itself; a document containing a series of conversations with African American and African Diaspora thought leaders and intellectuals on topics ranging from the environment and the legal system to the media, economy and psychological impact of the Obama family as a whole.

Part three sees the project move back to the public realm with a series of events and at www.redefining-blackpower.com, where readers can add their thoughts to the continuing discussion on black America during this "Age of Obama." Throughout February 2012, panel discussions will be held in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Washington D.C and Houston to talk about the black experience in the United States just months before the election. How will people vote? What are the key points African Americans would like to see President Obama tackle? Have we, the African American public, failed the president by not being vocal critics of the administration? And how have conversations around race changed in the last four years?

The panel forums will enable us to record thoughts, post them to the website and create a living historical document for reference today and for the future as people look back on this historic presidency.

The goal of the project is to link the experience of black freedom struggles of the past with the current work of social change advocates so that our future leaders can learn from everything that has gone before them.