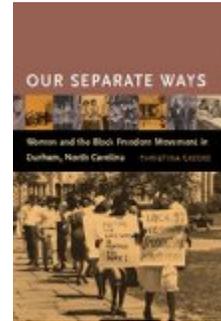


Christina Greene. *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xviii + 384 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5600-0; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2938-7.

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## Separate Races to Separate Classes

In *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, Christina Greene presents an assiduously researched, complex study of politically and organizationally active segments of Durham, North Carolina. Greene shows us how black women and their diverse allies led in the African American struggle to achieve equal education, economic opportunity, and a political voice in their neighborhoods and communities. This book takes ideas about black women and their roles as organizers from recent sociological and theoretical discussions and brings them to life in Durham, a fitting template for the urbanizing New South (see, for example, Belinda Robnett, *How Long, How Long? African American Women and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 1997).

Greene's extensive use of oral interviews and untapped archival sources gives the activist women of Durham names, tells us their words and actions, and describes what events inspired them, empowered them, gave them hope, disappointed them, and sometimes required them to act in seemingly contradictory ways. This book provides fresh and provocative lines of inquiry for historians of the modern civil rights movement and its aftermath by exploring personal interactions across race, class, and gender lines that often defy previous oversimplifications.

The first three chapters of *Our Separate Ways* provide background that makes the scope of this community study more satisfying. Although Greene admits that World War II provided the widest window of opportu-

nity for women, community organizing was well under way during the 1930s and 1940s. Although fraught with difficulty, these prewar years allowed black women to identify the challenges they would face for decades to come. Women's modest successes during this early phase planted seeds that made subsequent activism possible.

Through extensive mining of Durham's weekly black newspaper, the *Carolina Times*, and the records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branches in North Carolina, Greene demonstrates the day-to-day role women played in pushing an improvement and organizational agenda prior to the direct-action phase of protest in the 1960s. In this earlier period, the ability of many middle-class, educated African American women to serve as leaders was overshadowed by traditional black male leadership and handicapped by the attack on Popular Front and progressive biracial organizations, but Durham's black women consistently refused to be excluded. Through a few key organizations, such as the Young Women's Christian Association, the American Association of University Women, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, they kept their agendas alive.

One particularly interesting aspect of this study is the limited presence of influential local pastors and diligent churchwomen who occupy such prominence in the freedom movements of comparable southern cities. No doubt Greene's focus on women required that she look for women leaders outside of the patriarchal structure of

the black church and in secular and civic organizations. It would be interesting to know if the apparent lack of clerical leadership created a void that provided a unique opportunity for Durham's black women.

Another phase of organizing in Durham came with the opportunities provided to women during World War II and the assertiveness of black veterans, thousands of whom received training at Camp Butner nearby. During the 1940s, the anemic local NAACP branch was revitalized and reorganized under a more female and youth-influenced orientation. The Durham black community mobilized noticeably after the fires and unrest that followed the 1944 murder of Private Booker T. Spicely and the acquittal of the white bus driver who shot him in cold blood. In the 1950s, white backlash after the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the attempt to associate the NAACP with communism sorely challenged the black activist women of Durham, but they maintained pressure for inclusion and resisted intimidation. Women like Arlene Young helped further solidify the foundation of the NAACP by building up the youth councils and promoting loyalty through local black colleges and among youth organizations.

In some of the most original and insightful analysis in the book, Greene asks us to consider the "invisible" networks of women formed during informal discussions at beauty shops, in female-owned and female-operated drink houses, and among mothers on neighborhood front porches in Durham. She demonstrates how these social interactions enabled more formal and concerted action, such as challenges to continued school segregation policies after the *Brown* decision, evictions from housing in times when urban renewal cleared slums but provided no alternative housing, and non-recognition of union demands for housekeepers, janitors, and cafeteria workers at Duke University.

Greene also delineates how a number of Durham's low-income women were new to poverty because of personal circumstances and the shifting economy of the region, putting this community study into a wider context. She adds national context for local racial tensions by connecting such highly publicized events as the race riots in Detroit, Newark, Birmingham, Watts, and Orangeburg, S.C., to reaction in Durham. Although Greene acknowledges that men like Floyd McKissick, Louis Austin, and Howard Fuller played a meaningful role in mobilizing blacks in Durham, she maintains a sharp focus on the evolution of indigenous female leadership, giving us a richer, more complicated understanding of the fluidity of

race relations within personal and community situations.

At the heart of the book, we find low-income black women organizing their neighborhoods. From 1965 through 1968, they became more militant in demanding economic reforms, higher wages, and adequate housing. Operation Breakthrough was Durham's anti-poverty agency, stemming from a statewide program and partially funded by federal grants from President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. The neighborhood councils that grew out of these efforts gave Durham's women, first black and later white, a forum for expressing their demands and priorities. Often put down or met less than halfway, these women sometimes resorted to unconventional strategies of dissemblance, including "duplicitous, threats, and acting crazy" (p. 112). Greene beautifully illustrates the agency of low-income women (as in the case of Joyce Thorpe, a woman facing eviction who later became a successful litigant for fair housing) and shows how state and federal anti-poverty programs and previous anti-discrimination court decisions were direct catalysts for these women's bold actions.

With the end of the 1960s, conservative pressure from the federal government led to reductions in War on Poverty funding through the Office of Economic Opportunity because it seemed to be encouraging "militancy" and "undesirable" empowerment of divisive elements in black communities. In Durham, there was certainly a rising militancy, but local blacks saw their empowerment in a more positive light. Black Durham exhibited unity through its 1968-1969 boycott of white-owned businesses. Greene explains the key to the boycott's success was the tenacity of the female-dominated United Organizations for Community Improvement, more so than the leadership of the male-dominated Black Solidarity Committee. But the boycott also revealed problems: at ground level in Durham's African American community, there were class, generational, and gender tensions that emerged during the long months of the boycott. Greene forces us to see that the primary weakness of intraracial cooperation was due to the refusal of elites to give power to the poor.

Also in the late 1960s, a significant interracial association of women formed as Women in Action, an organization initiated by Elna Spalding, the wife of the wealthy black owner of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. These middle-class women, both black and white, kept a dialogue going in Durham during the volatile school integration process by creating a desegregation support center and also by holding teas. Knowing

that the most divisive racial issues might split the women, they avoided taking positions on the most controversial ones, such as the boycott. The book's title becomes clear in the closing chapter when the post-1960s rift in Durham society, and at large, mirrored class divisions instead of strictly racial ones.

*Our Separate Ways* is refreshing and important because low-income black women are finally at the center of the story ... yet they are not alone. Only through an

in-depth community study such as this can we see the extraordinarily complex social and political lives they led in navigating the freedom struggle. It brought them into conversation and conflict with black men, middle-class black and white women, low-income whites, and political and civic leaders at the local, state, and national levels. Greene's study is original and informative because it takes us up to 1970s Durham to demonstrate how the civil rights struggle failed to resolve class issues, giving us a clearer sense of why the revolution is unfinished.

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