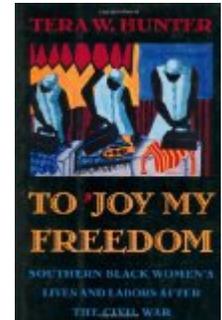


**Tera W. Hunter.** *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. ix + 311 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-89309-2.



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In this highly readable and sophisticated work, Tera Hunter has effectively integrated a social history of African-American working women with a broader analysis of political and economic conditions in the urban South. Hunter carefully highlights the complexity of black women's lives, emphasizing their ability to construct identities outside of the stereotypes imposed by white employers and city officials. However, she situates this process in the center of public discourses about race and gender in a crucial period of social transformation for southern cities: from Reconstruction to World War I. Central to Hunter's analysis is the dialectic of domination and resistance as black women developed tactics of survival--from institution building to the frequent quitting of jobs in household labor--in response to southern elites' attempts to control African Americans' lives in the workplace and on city streets. This carefully developed relationship allows Hunter to avoid either an over-romanticization of African-American women's struggles, or an overly pessimistic view of African-American life during the "nadir" of American race relations. However, readers expecting a book about the entire South,

as suggested by the title, may be disappointed, as Hunter restricts her narrative almost entirely to conditions in Atlanta. Notwithstanding this, Hunter's book makes an important contribution to the field of urban history as the first comprehensive analysis of African-American women's experience of and participation in city life.

The first two chapters of Hunter's book embed a social history of African-American women in a broader narrative of political and economic life in Atlanta. Her first chapter highlights the agency of Civil War era urban slaves who actively resisted the terms of their labor and thus hastened the destruction of slavery. Hunter continues this narrative through Reconstruction as ex-slaves flocked to cities such as Atlanta and shaped the "meanings of freedom" through workplace resistance, the exercise of political rights, and institution building. Although this story is a familiar one, Hunter highlights the role of African-American women, the majority of the black urban population, in contestations over what emancipation would mean for the black community. In particular, Hunter argues that by controlling their labor

through quitting, household workers deprived employers of complete power over the terms of their labor. Hunter carefully situates these individual tactics of resistance in the context of New South capitalist development and attempts by whites to curtail the political and social freedoms of emancipated slaves.

Having established the basic framework of domination and resistance during and after the Civil War, Hunter then turns to an exploration of quotidian strategies of survival in the late nineteenth century. In Chapter Three, she outlines the geographical distribution of black communities in Atlanta which paralleled an inequitable distribution of resources by city officials. In response to municipal neglect, black Atlantans founded formal institutions such as churches, schools, and fraternal lodges that provided both a physical space for community organizing and a training ground for political activity. In addition, black neighborhoods were dotted with informal institutions such as barbershops, small restaurants, and juke joints that provided spaces for leisure and further cemented communal bonds. Household workers used these formal and informal institutions to develop strategies to contest wages, hours, and workplace conditions set by white employers.

In Chapter Four, Hunter uncovers the most dramatic of these strategies: organized protests by household workers in Richmond, Atlanta and other cities. Although relatively rare, strikes by washerwomen and day workers highlight the organizational ability and political acumen of African-American women who directly challenged both employers and city officials who sought to control their labor. Central to these challenges was the development of informal communal ties in black neighborhoods that effectively linked the private world of household workers and the public world of political activism.

The strident political activism of Atlanta's African-American community in the 1870s and 1880s, however, was quickly followed by a period

of disenfranchisement, violence, and segregation culminating in the 1906 race riot. Hunter's next two chapters explore the impact of this "ascendancy of white rule" on Atlanta's African-American community. In the late nineteenth century, black Atlantans actively resisted segregation of public transportation, lack of municipal services, and growing police brutality. Following Earl Lewis, in his book *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (1991), Hunter emphasizes that African Americans used "segregated spaces" of Jim Crow Atlanta to "bolster their autonomy and collective power and to escape exploitation by whites" (p. 100). Segregated spaces also allowed for African-American entrepreneurship along commercial strips such as Auburn Avenue, and these spaces in turn enabled some African-American women to escape household labor for jobs as seamstresses, clerks, or prostitutes. In Chapter Six, Hunter explores how social welfare institutions developed by African-American women and men supported this resistance to white urban rule. Imbued with the spirit of Progressivism, African-American women founded clinics, schools, reformatories and churches in the wake of the 1906 riot. The most prominent of these institutions, the Neighborhood Union, was a cross-class organization similar in style and purpose to a settlement house. Hunter acknowledges that the leadership of the Neighborhood Union held elitist views regarding working-class women's leisure activities and domestic arrangements. But overall she views the work of the Union, and other Progressive-era black institutions, as drawing from a long tradition of communal activism.

This relatively harmonious picture of intra-community African-American urban life is disrupted in Hunter's next two chapters exploring black women's leisure. The definition of "wholesome" and "hurtful" amusements came not only from white city officials seeking to curtail and control black women's labor, but from middle and upper-class African-American reformers who

placed working-class black women as the central symbols of a well-ordered and socially mobile black urban community. Hunter argues that although working-class African-American women did not draw such strict lines in their choice of leisure, contests over commercial entertainment and public spaces where interracial mixing took place became central to struggles over Jim Crow. Hunter explores one form of leisure in depth in Chapter Eight: public dancing. She suggests that dance was a particularly significant form of play and self expression for an African-American working class that sought to "recuperate their bodies from exploitation" (p. 169). Like other forms of commercial entertainment, vernacular dance and its concomitant art form the blues gained critics from the ranks of the black middle class as well as white city officials. Both viewed black dance halls as a moral threat that undermined the work ethic and marred the urban landscape.

In a particularly innovative chapter, Hunter analyzes how tuberculosis became primarily associated with black female domestic workers. White Atlantans, according to Hunter, viewed African-American women as the purveyors of physical as well as moral decay in the early decades of the twentieth century. White hysteria over the "servant's disease" led to city officials' attempts to license washerwomen and control the domestic life of household workers who had access to private white homes. The African-American community, particularly black female activists, resisted these efforts and organized their own public health campaigns to address the problems of tuberculosis in black communities. Thus, the second half of *To Joy My Freedom* effectively demonstrates how the dialectic of domination and resistance occurred on a variety of levels outside the workplace: from dance halls to health clinics. Hunter ends her book with a short chapter on the Great Migration, highlighting the increased repression surrounding the war years, in particular the startling efforts to apply "work or fight" laws to black

household workers. Migration out of Atlanta and other southern cities, was, for many, a final act of resistance against the New South power structure.

This final chapter, in its narrative form and broad implications, ties in nicely with Hunter's earlier chapters on Reconstruction and the advent of Jim Crow. However, Hunter's more innovative and sophisticated analyses of black women's leisure and the significance of tuberculosis stand apart from the rest of work. Weaving this cultural analysis throughout the book may have been a more effective way of presenting the changing dynamics of domination and resistance. For example, Hunter argues in Chapter Seven, "Women's behavior became a trope for the race, their public deportment and carriage the basis by which some assumed the entire race would be judged" (p. 166). Although this point seems central to community dynamics in Atlanta, it is only discussed in the realm of leisure where intra-community debates over deportment and morality are pushed to the fore.

Early chapters on the growth of institutional and community life in the late nineteenth century, in contrast, downplay intracommunity strife. For example, Hunter's discussion of religious life after emancipation minimizes inter-denominational conflict that centered on black women's worship styles and leadership roles. In part, this reflects Hunter's use of two historiographical traditions in African-American urban history. On the one hand, she does a masterful job contextualizing the social history of Atlanta's African-American women in the political and economic developments of the New South. Indeed, only by exploring the motivations of white city officials and employers can Hunter flesh out the domination experienced by black female workers. In doing so, Hunter's work reflects the best of the "ghetto school" tradition which embedded African-American history in the political and economic geography of cities. Hunter also draws from the tradition of more recent scholarship in African-American urban history

that examines intracommunity struggles and triumphs, rather than the structural constraints faced by black urban dwellers. Such attention to intracommunity dynamics allows her to stretch her analysis away from the workplace and reform institutions to the public dance floors and city streets that were integral to working-class blacks' experience of the city. In the end, however, these two models are not fully integrated in the text. Nevertheless, by incorporating analyses of leisure and emphasizing the central place that African-American women held in public discourses about disease, urban geography, and morality, Hunter effectively combines cultural, social, and political analyses to give us a new perspective on Atlanta and the New South.

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