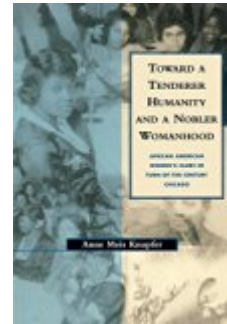


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne Meis Knupfer. *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1996. x + 209 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-4691-2; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4671-4.

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The field of African American women's history has grown tremendously over the last twenty-five years, and attention to women's community work has been among the major themes that have emerged in this scholarship. One fruitful avenue for research on women's community activity has been the black women's club movement, which began in the late nineteenth century and continued to attract members during the twentieth century. Anne Meis Knupfer's research on Chicago adds to the growing scholarship on the significance of black club women to the development of black communities and the maintenance of community institutions. Despite limited archival records on Chicago's black women's clubs, Knupfer carefully mined two black newspapers, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Broad Ax*, and uncovered an incredible number of clubs organized by African American women in the city.

Knupfer's study of Chicago is part of the trend in black women's history that emphasizes that class divisions shaped black women's activism. She shows us that club women's efforts to sustain the city's social welfare institutions were influenced by their class status and location within black Chicago. Indeed, as she reminds us, Chicago had many black communities, which were "stratified according to social class, educational attainment, and type of employment" (p. 2). She points to the tensions that emerged between the African American elite and middle class, as well as black southern migrants and established black Chicago residents.

Knupfer provides an overview of Chicago club women's work by focusing on club activities in politics, education, social welfare, and fundraising. She investi-

gates the establishment of "other homes" (homes for children, working girls, and the aged), and the development of social settlements, literary clubs, and social clubs. A number of historians have documented the importance of these types of social welfare institutions. Indeed, I wish she had more directly spoken to this secondary literature in framing what was unique or typical in Chicago. Such discussion would have added an analytic depth that was often lacking in this study.

However, Knupfer does succeed in providing a rich, detailed picture of activities in Chicago. She has uncovered much raw data, that can be difficult to find, and then pieced together the scattered bits of evidence to document the activities of dozens of black women's clubs. Although I wish she had fleshed out more individuals, especially nationally known women like Fannie Barrier Williams, she does uncover many lesser known figures. For example, she provides an appendix that identifies over 150 black club women and another that lists over two hundred black women's clubs in Chicago. Such information suggests how widespread club activity was, even if we know little about each and every club and club woman. Such details will prove useful to a number of scholars. For example, historians of medicine will be interested in the fact that six of the club women she located were physicians, a striking figure given that by 1920 there were still only sixty-five black women physicians in the entire country.

I particularly enjoyed Knupfer's fascinating discussion of the economic contributions of the seemingly frivolous social clubs, including whist clubs, dancing clubs, and matrimony clubs. This is an avenue of black

club life that has received little attention from historians, perhaps because scholars too have dismissed card games and balls as irrelevant. Apparently some club leaders at the time, like Nannie Helen Burroughs, also criticized such club activity as superficial. However, Knupfer makes a good case for paying attention to these organizations as she reveals their impact on economic and social relations. She argues that charity balls, whist contests, and weddings “supported the predominantly female businesses of dressmakers, milliners, chiropodists, hairdressers, and manicurists” (p. 124). These were important avenues for female employment in a city where most black women ended up in domestic service jobs. For example, charity balls not only reaffirmed the class status of Chicago’s black “Elite 400,” but the proceeds went to the black poor, and black businesswomen engaged as dressmakers, milliners, manicurists, and hair-

dressers gained clients.

In focusing on a single city, Knupfer is able to show that black women’s club work was far more complex than we had imagined. Not only did black club life illustrate class divisions between the poor and the middle class but also between the middle class and the elite. Not only was women’s club-sponsored social welfare work a form of political activity, but women’s club-sponsored social events were a form of economic activity. The multiple meanings of black women’s community work continues to challenge facile assumptions about women’s history and black life in America.

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