



Kali N. Gross. *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. 248 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3799-7.

Reviewed by Sylvea Hollis (University of Iowa)

Published on H-Women (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

## The Criminalized Past of Black Womanhood in the City of Brotherly Love

“Currently, black women are the fastest-growing prison population in the United States. Black women account for nearly half of all female prisoners in the country though they comprise less than 10 percent of the population. And though black women have often been disproportionately represented in the criminal justices system, we have little insight into historical trends of their ramifications. This epidemic cannot be successfully arrested without some sense of the historical scope of the problem” (p. 3).

*Colored Amazons*, by historian Kali N. Gross, provides insight into the lives of poor, working-class black women criminals and their reactions to oppression during the post-Reconstruction era in Philadelphia. Guided by interest in uncovering forgotten and lost historical narratives, the title of Gross’s work is a telling source, taken from a newspaper article about two crimes in Philadelphia that involved “colored Amazons.” Gross’s innovative work is exceptional for its position in the historiography of black women’s history, brilliant use of source material, and noble application of social history. *Colored Amazons* is rooted in understanding the social context of these crimes committed by African American women and the ways they navigated through Philadelphia by employing various tactics, some legal, others not. Furthermore, Gross’s book is not a historical excuse for the crimes, but it is an in-depth study into the complexity of urban and penal reform as well as a look at the ways that black women served as actors during the post-Reconstruction era.

Gross’s study sits in a small, but growing pew of poor and working-class African American historical scholarship, aside Tera Hunter, Robin D. G. Kelley, Early Lewis, Nell Irvin Painter, Joe Trotter, and Rhonda Y. Williams.[1] As she notes, “African-American history, and much of Black Studies, for that matter, was resurrected, collected, and ‘preached’ not solely for educa-

tional purposes but also for community empowerment, an empowerment that was political, social, and in many ways psychological” (p. 1). Gross continues this important legacy and expands the topic by highlighting new actors in this history—black female criminals. She places the women at the center of her research, and, by doing so, follows a legitimated and important line of scholars, most notably Deborah Gray White, Darlene Clark Hine, and Elsa Barkley Brown.[2] Additionally, just as Elizabeth Higginbotham’s landmark essay, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” highlighted the intersectionality of black women in American history, so too does Gross’s work place black women criminals in the position of navigating the streets of Philadelphia, ideas of proper womanhood, and prison reform, by casting light on “the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality shape citizenship and criminal justice” (p. 2).[3]

Gross’s sources highlight the perpetuation of stereotypes and the role that these images play in popular culture, and ultimately the everyday lives of working-class women. The most valuable traditional source in the study is the warden’s journal. His records were contextualized with broader ideas about the criminal behavior of black women, to illustrate how “the perpetuation and apparatuses of the state jointly constructed black female crime” (p. 3). Perhaps most remarkable about this study is Gross’s ability to create a fluid historical narrative of a marginalized population. Birth, census, tax, and property records are difficult to locate for the post-emancipation working class and poor; subsequently, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find documents (i.e., diaries, journals, etc.) produced by the population she was researching. Instead, Gross read the actions of black female criminals as well as the actions of the population that sought to “reform” them. Since most of the material from the prisons she found was conducive for quantitative, rather than

qualitative, analysis, she used their records to produce databases for her research.

The city of Philadelphia is an important backdrop for Gross's work. It is a unique place to study this topic because Philadelphia's strong Quaker roots politicized early discussions about freedom and democracy, and the city also had the largest population of free blacks before the Civil War. More specifically, the Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, an important reference for this study, has an elusive history of prison reform. In terms of criminal history and public policy, Philadelphia was an early proponent of the "rhetoric of biological criminality," better known as the "born criminal" (p. 7).

Violence is a metalanguage in *Colored Amazons*, and within this framework she studies violence against black women—including physical violence, and also the "ways in which crippling economic exclusion and social isolation constitute a tropic of violence that affected black women's lives" (p. 5). She illustrates how racist images and stories created a violent environment for African Americans, particularly for African American women. Gross argues that the crimes and experiences of black women criminals were unique and distinctive from their black male, white female, and white male counterparts. Black women were reacting and trying to survive within restrictive social spaces that were racialized, sexed, and classed. Gross follows trends in urban and penal reform and discusses how the press' and other modes of popular cultures' treatment of black women criminals influenced tangible changes in public policy, creating laws and systems that criminalized black women.

The book's chapters are centrally located around black women and their crimes. Gross peels back the layers of this discussion and systematically builds her case by incorporating a teleological framework. The first two chapters acclimate readers to the early history of criminal justice in Philadelphia. In chapter 1, "Of Law and Virtue," the republican and antebellum eras' contradictions marked by ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality all come together to tell the story of Alice Clifton. Gross focuses her lens on this woman's life in order to cast a broader net for understanding black women criminals and the early legal history of Pennsylvania. The chapter introduces the themes of "black citizenship" and "changing social demographics" in mainstream public discourse. Chapter 2, "Service Savors of Slavery," maps the cramped grid of Philadelphia and foregrounds black women's experiences in the city. Gross introduces them as actors in a community consisting of native-born whites, and immigrants, as well as middle- and upper-

class blacks. She looks specifically at the crimes of domestic servants. From her analysis, Gross convincingly makes the argument that "poverty and alienation created the stark conditions that contributed to black women's crimes—overwhelmingly larceny" (p. 10). Gross queries the work of white and black social reformers in the city and illustrates how they initiated "moral panics," eventually limiting black women's freedom through the codification of laws, policing, and societal confinement (p. 10).<sup>[4]</sup>

Gross's next two chapters specifically analyze the crimes of black women against the background of popular culture ideas of black womanhood. Chapter 3, "Tricking the Tricks," is an evocative look at black female violence and sex crimes. She specifically addresses how these crimes related to the context of the criminal's social positioning as well as her inability to attain inclusion within black womanhood. Gross argues that "black female crime, violent crimes in particular, is evidence of those who did not, or perhaps could not, dissemble the vicissitudes of poverty and discrimination" (p. 10). She connects this argument to noted scholar Hine's study on the culture of dissemblance. Gross's interest with the culture of dissemblance is to suggest that black female violence is essentially a residue; it left a mark on black women, one that they could not dissemble. This chapter also draws on the interpretive and thematic framework of Melton McLaurin's study of Celia, a young slave woman who killed her master in 1851. Chapter 4, "Roughneck Women, Pale Representations, and Dark Crimes," is an interesting analysis of popular culture material and the way the press caricatured black female criminals. The press exaggerated their acts, and various other groups drew images of black female criminals rooted in "contrived false notions of illicit sex and danger in the city" (p. 10). The general public participated in this characterization by purchasing items that perpetuated such images.

Perhaps the most evocative work takes place in the next chapter. Chapter 5, "Deviant by Design," guides readers to understanding how early prison reformers, police, and theorists created a major shift in the ideology of criminality, and highlights how this change affected black women. Gross outlines "a move from regarding criminals as individuals who committed crimes and could be rehabilitated to identifying individuals who were inherently criminal and ultimately in need of containment" (p. 11). Using the Eastern State Penitentiary as a model, she shows how the prison's policies supported notions of black female criminality and used these incorporated policies to create rigid systems of physical and mental

confinement. Particularly interesting in this chapter is the story of black female criminals pushing back against borders outlined for them and the ways that some learned to use tactics and strategies to escape certain limitations placed on them. Gross's detailed research in this chapter is perhaps most tangible for understanding present-day conditions and strengthening discourse about how to effectively reach active and engaged citizens from the working class and how to rehabilitate female criminals. The conclusion ("She Was Born in Prison") may end the book, but it also opens a new discussion on how "black female criminality was birthed both by the perpetrators themselves and by the broader structural inequalities played out in the legal system" (p. 12).

*Colored Amazons* is not only for academic audiences but also for public policy analysts, legal professionals, and people who are interested in understanding how the complexities of race, gender, and class affect America's ideology on crime and prison reform. A proponent of the usable past, Gross is inspired by many events, including, but not limited to, her work with a group of students at the State Correctional Institution in Muncy, Pennsylvania. *Colored Amazons* is a remarkable study very much rooted in expanding the historiography of black womanhood, contextualizing traditional sources in innovative ways, and incorporating social history to better understand the context of committed crimes.

#### Notes

[1]. Tera Hunter, *To 'joy my freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labor after the Civil War* (Cambridge:

Harvard University Press, 1997); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Nell Irvin Painter and Hosea Hudson, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: The Life and Times of a Black Radical* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994); Joe William Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991); and Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[2]. Deborah Gray White, *A'rn't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. and Company, 1999); Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transformation from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1. (1994): 107-146.

[3]. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274.

[4]. See also Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 739.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Sylvea Hollis. Review of Gross, Kali N., *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22981>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.