



Martha S. Jones. *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*. The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 317 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3152-6; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5845-5.

Reviewed by Christy G. Harrison (Clark Atlanta University)

Published on H-SAWH (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm

Nineteenth-Century African American Female Activism and the Public Sphere

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the “Woman Question” arose as a topic of fierce debate among abolitionists, activists, and suffragists. In the aftermath of the Civil War, female activists lobbied Congress for suffrage. Additionally, women campaigned for personal autonomy, property rights, and issues related to marriage and citizenship.

Postbellum historiography on female activism examines the paradigm of gendering the public and private spheres. In *All Bound Up Together*, Martha S. Jones argues that during the nineteenth century, African American women created a public sphere through which they sought to bring about change. Jones traces the lives of African American female activists who consciously invaded masculine public space via newspapers, the lecture circuit, churches, fraternal orders, clubs, and schools to promote their causes. Jones examines the speeches and writings of African American activists, both male and female, to demonstrate the interconnectedness of race and gender for African American women in their pursuit of citizenship and civil rights.

Jones explains that the gendered public sphere and racialized private sphere often overlapped. She focuses on the common institutions of black public culture that were the mainstays of the African American community: churches and schools. She also examines many organizations that arose out of black churches and schools, including literary circles, mutual aid organizations, war relief agencies, fraternal orders, and political organizations. Jones juxtaposes African Americans’ efforts to create public space within segregated society with African American women’s successful negotiation of a separate status within that marginalized space.

Jones’s thesis is that initially women activists emphasized the home and domesticity, in alliance with the prevailing masculine school of thought. These women pro-

moted their ideas through white antislavery newspapers and the black press. By 1850, the idea of “female influence” was changing, but domesticity remained a potent concept throughout the nineteenth century. For black women one generation removed from slavery, the idea of being in charge of the home was empowering, especially during a time when white women’s employment of black servants was considered essential for establishing mastery over the domestic domain.

Later, simply having female influence became an ineffective vehicle to institute change due to the fact that domesticity was the theoretical core. African American women began suggesting in their writings that prejudice rooted in sex was similar to prejudice rooted in race. Black female activists began confronting the “Woman Question,” and their exclusion from it, since mainstream society did not acknowledge them as women. Almost immediately among black women, the question began arising as to where their loyalties lay, with their race or with their sex, a question that would plague African American activists for the next 125 years.

Jones offers two unique perspectives: she freely attributes credit to the men who were supportive of black female activists; and she focuses a chapter on the church as both an institution for change and an institution that relegated women to their “proper place.” During Reconstruction, women had become active in the church in terms of establishing autonomous organizations with their own fundraising and leadership. Once Reconstruction was over, and segregation became more than just a practice but a legal precedent, black men were pushed out of the male public sphere. These men then began taking back the leadership roles that women had begun to adopt. The African American church, which was the spine of the community, became the center of controversies in terms of what women were allowed to do.

Jones's work acknowledges and builds on other examinations of nineteenth-century African American female activists, such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's study of the institution of the church as a central foundation of activism, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (1994); Deborah Gray White's study of club women, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (1999); and Glenda Gilmore's analysis of the intertwining of spiritual and secular activism, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (1996). Jones discusses in depth activists Maria Stewart and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who are also highlighted in Paula Giddings's seminal work, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984), on black women's history. Jones does not present the entire lives of these activists but focuses on their public speechmaking. She also draws on Rebecca Edwards's argument, in *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (1997), that the seeds of women's activism after the Civil War were rooted in resistance to control.[1]

Jones concludes her study of activist women with a brief discussion of the "nadir" of women's rights and, more specifically, black women's rights at the end of the nineteenth century. The end of Reconstruction, the implementation of Jim Crow, and the refusal of Congress

to grant suffrage to white women all point to political setbacks in terms of both black and white women's rights. However, this era became a fertile ground out of which the secular clubwomen's movement arose and the churchwomen's movement thrived. Public activism continued into the twentieth century.

Jones's sources are extensive. Her notes include details from private journals, women's speeches, interviews, minutes from meetings, nineteenth-century articles from black newspapers, and secondary sources. She includes descriptions of the sources and points to how she has used them when her interpretation varies from the standard understanding.

This text is an excellent introductory study of nineteenth-century African American women and their very public quest for equality. Jones successfully demonstrates that African American women did succeed in carving out a place in the public sphere. Advanced researchers may wish to partner this book with other texts to glean additional information about some of the activists whose work is only generally examined here. Jones's discussion of gender, power, race, and politics is significant, as is her emphasis on the integral role of the church. However, in Jones's quest for continuity, concepts and ideas occasionally appear redundant as phrases reoccur multiple times. This quibble aside, *All Bound Up Together* is a welcome addition to the historiography.

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: Christy G. Harrison. Review of Jones, Martha S., *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23773>



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