

H-Net Reviews

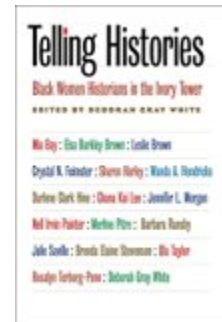
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah Gray White, ed. *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*. Gender and American Culture Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Illustrations. 291 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3201-1; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5881-3.

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Bringing Down Barriers: Black Women in the Historical Profession

Telling Histories is dedicated to Anna Julia Cooper (c. 1858-1964), who became the first black American woman to earn a PhD in history (University of Paris, Sorbonne), and Marion Thompson Wright (1902-62), the first black American woman to earn the terminal degree in history (Columbia University) in the United States. Cooper and Wright earned their degrees in 1925 and 1940, respectively. This was long after both black men and white women entered the field. From a historical perspective, it is not difficult to fathom why it took them between thirty and forty-five years after W. E. B. DuBois became the first black American man to earn a PhD in history (Harvard University, 1895). From the 1880s through the 1950s, professional black women were steered toward the more feminized occupations of teaching, nursing, social work, and librarianship.

During the Jim Crow era, black women responded to the omnipresent exclusionary guiding principles of white society by advancing an ideology and strategy of self-help while also reacting productively to the dominant gender conventions within the black community. Within this period, black women in the academy generally and the history profession specifically faced the double “-isms” of racism and sexism. Despite this, before Cooper and Wright, many women without a PhD published their historical research and scholarship. Although black women historians did not have a formal professional organization, they did share a cause, attitude, and philosophy that allowed them to sharpen their

craft as historians.

The attendance of black women in graduate school, faculty participation, and published historical scholarship has increased significantly since the era of Cooper and Wright. *Telling Histories* is edited by Deborah Gray White, the Board of Governors Professor at Rutgers University, and consists of essays by seventeen black women historians. The book examines and conveys the multifarious encounters, difficulties, impediments, and rewards these women have faced in the profession because they are both black and female. Ordered by the years the contributors earned their terminal degrees in the discipline, the compilation of essays is multigenerational and recognizes notable professors who aided in building the “infrastructure” of black women’s history (pp. 77, 151). Central to the expansion of scholarship on the history of black women, the seventeen contributors are, in alphabetical order, Mia Bay, Elsa Barkley Brown, Leslie Brown, Crystal Feimster, Sharon Harley, Wanda A. Hendricks, Darlene Clark Hine, Chana Kai Lee, Jennifer L. Morgan, Nell Irvin Painter, Merline Pitre, Barbara Ransby, Julie Saville, Brenda Elaine Stevenson, Ula Taylor, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, and White.

The book begins with Painter, the first of the group to earn the terminal degree in history (Harvard, 1974), and ends with Feimster, who was mentored by Painter at Princeton and earned her terminal degree in 2000. Like black women in the legal profession, these women in

higher education to some extent found the academy's arena comparatively inequitable. More often than not, they found that black women's values, visions, and voices were rebuffed or excluded, while administrators and colleagues often championed the Euro-andocentric perspective.

Often considered "two-fers" by proponents and opponents of affirmative action, these black women scholars give accounts of how they met and confronted racism, sexism, and homophobia on college campuses. Their stories disclose how the personal and the political intersect in the researching and writing of history. The seventeen essays follow black women scholars who entered the discipline of history during and after the civil rights and black power movements, persevered in the chaotic 1970s, and in the 1980s opened up the subfield of black women's history.

Noted historians, such as John Hope Franklin, August Meier, and John Blassingame, mentored several of the now-renowned black women historians in the book. Few of the women had black female faculty mentors who could have provided some point of view on the interrelation and intersection of race and gender. More often than not, these women experienced being the only black student, woman, or black faculty member in a department. In addition to isolationism, they faced racism and sexism. Notwithstanding these challenges, the contributors emerge as role models and mentors for the next generation of black women historians.

The writers cover a broad range chronologically, as some have been out of graduate school for a long period, while others received their PhDs more recently. Reared in different parts of the nation, they teach in various sections of the country, have different research interests, and serve a diversity of institutions. Still, some basic themes connect them as black female scholars in a discipline that until recently was dominated primarily by white men.

Many of the book's contributors are members of Phi Beta Kappa and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Some are celebrated professors of history at such notable universities as Princeton; Rutgers; the University of California, Los Angeles; Northwestern; and Michigan State. Of the seventeen, Hine and Painter have served as president of the Organization of American Historians and the Southern Historical Association. Hine has also served as president of the Southern Association for Women Historians. Although now recognized among their colleagues, these scholars, particularly those who

have been in the discipline the longest, experienced overt and covert patterns of gender and racial discrimination when they began their journey and endeavored to research and write about the experiences of black women, whose histories and voices had long been unappreciated and unacknowledged in the overall context of the American historical experience. It is interesting to note that when women's history came to the fore in the 1970s, the majority of scholars who engaged in the subfield did not include women of color. Therefore, as "his story" was generally perceived to mean white men, "her story" often excluded women who were nonwhite.

A number of the essayists write emotionally of their labor in the academy during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when research interest on race exceeded attention to or awareness of issues that related to gender. A prime example of this is found in White's discourse about penning her book *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985). White's essay offers a glimpse into what it was like to be a trailblazer in the groundbreaking sphere of black women's history when the apposite language did not yet exist to give voice to the interdependence of gender and race.

The authors help us discern what it means to be female and black American professionals in the discipline of history. They accentuate the importance and worth of professional networks and mentors for all aspirants wanting to succeed within the academy. Because there was once no such organization for black women historians, in 1977 three black women historians (Terborg-Penn, Eleanor Smith, and Elizabeth Parker) recognized the necessity of having a uniquely focused organization within the profession to recruit other black women nationwide. They sought to support black women in the historical profession; disseminate information by, for, and about black women; and promote scholarship by and about black women. Two years later, the Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH) was founded. As Painter explains, black women historians are still confronted by "people [who] will try to make you feel unwelcomed,... not good enough,... out-of-step, and insufficiently respectful to your historiographical elders for as long as you remain productive" (p. 283). Notwithstanding, the pioneering historian insists that black women in the profession are able to survive and thrive by "supporting each other and getting together on a regular basis to celebrate ... survival" (p. 284). Many of these scholars noted two historical organizations that were crucial to their networking within the field, the ABWH and the Association for the Study of African American Life and

History (ASLAH).

Just as important, the essayists stress the merit of allowing those trained in the discipline to research the histories of all who are a part of the human race. Through investigation, scholarship, and the resulting publications, the historical community, both professional and lay, hears the voices that have been recurrently muffled in the historical canon of the past. Between 1992 and 2008, four books have addressed black women in the academy and professional schools. These include Elizabeth L. Ihle's edited collection, *Black Women in Higher Education: An Anthology of Essays, Studies, and Documents* (1992, twenty years after Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*); Lois Benjamin's *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils* (1997); Stephanie Y. Evans's *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1950-1954: An Intellectual History* (2007); and Elwood Watson's *Outsiders Within: Black Women in the Legal Academy after Brown v. Board* (2008). Like Hine's *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (1985), all address the issues black women have faced as they navigated both race and gender expectations.

Engagingly written, *Telling Histories* should appeal to multiple audiences. Taken together, these stories underscore the firm hold of racism, sexism, and classism within American society in general and the academy and his-

tory departments specifically. While presenting and often resolving theoretical and methodological questions, the book not only is valuable for graduate students but is also a significant contribution to the field and should facilitate bringing down barriers, both within and outside the academy, that constrain the professorial ranks, stifle voices, and preclude diverse academicians and scholars from writing and teaching without restraint. The contributors' content is largely descriptive but it also provides analysis about the progression of scholarly trends and instruction in historiography to historians at all professional stages.

Even though the essayists confronted numerous challenges, this book is not a chronicle of complaints. However, it does offer an alternative to the traditional method of conducting historical scholarship. These historians question the established "objective" method and favor identifying with their research topics in a process described as "relational and contradictory," which produces historical studies of connection rather than of abstraction (p. 135).

The recipient of the 2008 Letitia Woods Brown Memorial Award given by the ABWH, White has successfully blended scholars' personal accounts and voices, including her own, into a telling narrative about the experiences of black women in the ivory tower.

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