

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Gregory. *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. xii + 282 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01739-6.

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## Identity and Activism in a Black Working Class Community

During the past few decades, there has been quite a bit of ethnographic research on Black communities in the United States. Despite the great knowledge which has been provided by such studies, these works have tended to be primarily and often exclusively focused on the plight of the Black poor. As a result, their conclusions have typically been centered on both the social disorganization as well as the powerlessness of Black urban communities.

In *Black Corona*, New York University Anthropologist Steven Gregory seeks to broaden the scope of ethnographic research by examining working class political activism and community life among Black residents in the adjacent areas known as North Corona and East Elmhurst, in Queens, New York. Based on his examination of community and local periodicals, interviews with activists, and his own first-hand observations of community life and politics, Gregory takes us on a journey in which he details the formation and development of the Black community in Corona and East Elmhurst, collectively referred to by the author as Black Corona, from the early 1900s through the mid-1990s. Along the way, he provides an enlightened understanding of those social practices “that enable or disable people from acting collectively as political subjects” (p. 12).

As one would expect, racially discriminatory hiring, lending, housing, and social practices set the stage for the spatial development of Black Corona. Following World War II, these practices interact with changes in the economy to produce a more racially segregated area and con-

sequently a more encompassing racial identity among Black Coronans. Although racial identity does not completely obliterate other social distinctions, it does lead Black residents to rely less and less on factors such as class, length of residence, and place of birth when placing distinctions on one another. As the author correctly asserts and demonstrates through the presentation of his research, the adjoined Corona/East Elmhurst section “is a Black community, because, through much of its history, its residents have been subjected to practices of racial discrimination and subordination that inextricably tied their socioeconomic well-being and mobility to their racial identity and to the places where they have lived and raised their children. And, equally important, Corona is a Black community because its residents fought back as a Black community” (pp. 10-11). And the residents of Black Corona do indeed fight back—not only *against* the forces of urban decline and the encroaching arm of governmental politics but also *for* the survival and prosperity of their community.

Indeed, in contrast to the depiction of Black urban areas as jungles of disarray and disempowerment, what Gregory presents us with is a community of vibrant social and political activism, in which individuals employ a myriad of devices to negotiate through and influence the everchanging political and social phenomena which shape the power structure. Certainly, many of his observations regarding power, politics and community development are not new. For instance, Gregory’s conclusions that the growth of the anti-poverty bureaucracy in the 1960s structured and indeed constrained the pursuit

and development of effective Black political power and activism and that the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey used a divide and conquer strategy to break up community alliances based on opposition to an airport rail link are not at all surprising. Both of these points have been made by other scholars in other contexts.

To be sure, the benefits of *Black Corona* are not to be found in the separately stated conclusions of the book's author, but rather in the breadth and complexity of his analysis of community identity, activism and power relations. Ultimately, we are presented with a constellation of forces, including, race, class, gender, and the state, which help to shape both the formation of community identity and the pathways to and possibilities for power.

Despite the book's strengths, however, there are occasional points at which Gregory could have delved a bit more deeply. In one especially detailed analysis involving a community activist named Edna Baskin, Gregory demonstrates quite clearly how one can successfully work within and around the constraints of larger power structures. For instance, when the tenant leaders of Baskin's housing development in Lefrak City deny her support for a voter registration drive, she starts her own. When she finds that several relevant social issues are not being addressed by existing community organizations, she takes the lead in launching a new organization. In the latter instance, Baskin both deftly avoids the cooption of her group by existing structures, while winning praise and gaining legitimacy from those same institutions.

In this case, Gregory's analysis of community activism becomes less effective when he adds gender to the mix. As Gregory shows, Baskin consciously chooses to negotiate through the potential minefields of a patriarchal community and society by consistently ensuring that men who support her organization, even in small ways, are portrayed more prominently than she. As the author correctly concludes, the Baskin example is a classic case of a woman finding herself in the equivocal situation of both resisting and supporting existing power relations (p. 133). Unfortunately, Gregory does not question whether the actual patriarchal forces in the community were as strong as Baskin believed. In other words, we are left to question whether Baskin's efforts to exaggerate the leadership of Black men in her organization were truly necessary to the group's success. Furthermore, the author does not take what appears to be an opportune point in the book to draw a comparison between Baskin's leadership and the leadership of other Black women in

the community. In short, did other Black women leaders use the same tactics as Baskin to attain political and policy success, not to mention personal achievements? And, to what extent has the activist community become less patriarchal over the years? These questions, though directly relevant to Gregory's discussion of gender, especially as it relates to community identity and activism, are not addressed.

A second area of weakness in *Black Corona* involves the author's failure to examine the impact of Latin American immigration on the Black community. In the book's early pages, Gregory discusses race relations, not simply between Black and white residents, but between Black residents and whites of varying ethnic backgrounds. However, the author pays almost no attention to the fact that during the past quarter century, Corona has had a massive influx of Latin American residents. Just as different white ethnic groups have responded to Black Americans in unique ways and hence had distinct influences on Black communities, one can expect that Latin Americans have had their own impact on Black urban areas. However, Gregory does not examine how a large influx of Latin Americans over several decades influenced the identity or affected the development of political activism in Black Corona.

Note that the question regarding Latin American immigration is also relevant to a portion of Gregory's fine case study of the public negotiations to develop an airport rail link, which would cut across a small portion of Manhattan, and a fairly sizable area of Queens, including Black Corona, ultimately, terminating at John F. Kennedy Airport. In this case, Gregory makes the point that white Jackson Heights residents were turned away from joining with their neighbors in Black Corona because they "fram[ed] neighborhood problems as emanating from the behaviors of 'outsider' groups, such as immigrants, welfare families, and the homeless" and thereby "affirmed racial and ethnic bigotries," while "promot[ing] the view that community integrity required the exclusion, rather than the negotiation of differences" (p. 246). Here, Gregory is referring to the fact that many white residents of Jackson Heights were preoccupied with what one resident termed as the "invasion" of low income outsiders into their community. Although Gregory's point that the "us versus them" approach to politics greatly diminished the possibility of an alliance between white Jackson Heights and Black Corona is probably correct, this is by no means a foregone conclusion. What is needed here is a deeper and more direct analysis of whether white residents' fears of low income *Latin American* "invaders"

would lead them to walk away from a potentially beneficial alliance with *Black* Coronans of their own socio-economic class. After all, the Black residents of North Corona and East Elmhurst were surely undergoing many of the same changes, and, indeed, addressing many of the same challenges faced by the white residents of Jackson Heights.

Despite the areas where Gregory's analysis can be strengthened, *Black Corona* is a book worthy of praise and one which should be of interest to scholars from a variety of fields. Ultimately, given that this is indeed a case study of one community and the issues regarding community identity and development are numerous, complex and everchanging, Gregory's work will serve more as a vehicle for raising questions than for answering them. But then, that is part of his purpose. Through *Black*

*Corona*, Gregory hopes to refocus the academic discourse on the complexities of Black communities and broaden our analyses beyond what has become an enriching but often narrow focus on impoverished urban areas. This he has achieved. It will be up to other scholars to assist in providing a fuller and more accurate picture, not only of the development of Black communities of various socio-economic backgrounds, but of the diverse racial and ethnic patchwork which blankets the American landscape.

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