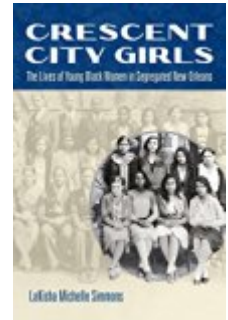


LaKisha Michelle Simmons. *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. xiii + 266 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-2280-4.



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African American girls and women have been doubly burdened with both racial and gender oppression. They have had to endure the historical forces of enslavement and then Jim Crow segregation, while at the same time contend with sexual oppression, harassment, and violence. W. E. B. Du Bois, in his groundbreaking and oft-cited work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), explains that blacks have coped with and endured racial oppression in the white-dominated United States by developing a “double consciousness,” or two, separate identities, “an American” and “a Negro” with “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.” African Americans strive to embrace both identities and use them to develop one “better and truer self” by preserving their African heritage while seeking acceptance in white-dominated society. Du Bois, however, genders his understanding of the African American to create a “better and truer self” by asserting that it will lead to a “self-conscious manhood.”[1] With meticulous research and careful analysis, LaKisha Michelle Simmons, in *Crescent City Girls*, builds

on and complicates Du Bois’s argument by exploring black girls’ public and private experiences within what she views as their “double bind”. Black girls, in essence, Simmons argues, had to not only contend with racism and violence, but also navigate the social expectations of female respectability and purity.

Simmons uses New Orleans, Louisiana, from 1930 to 1954, a period of legalized segregation, as the backdrop to examine the expectations, experiences, and behaviors of working- and middle-class, adolescent African American girls between ages nine and twenty. She takes on the challenging task of identifying black girls’ inner lives at a time when few primary sources disclose their thoughts by discerning the pauses and silences in the oral histories, autobiographies, and manuscript collections, among other sources. She adds nuance to her study by reconstructing the ways in which the subjectivities of black girls shaped their individual outlook. Within the context of white domination, spatial, cultural, familial, emotional, linguistic, and corporal experiences, among other

factors, formed black girls' view of themselves and their city and affected their decision making within that environment. Yet as city dwellers and the city itself changed, and the messages black girls received often conflicted, black girls had to regularly adjust to their environment, traverse safer roads, and alter their behavior according to the people they encountered. Black girls had to develop a fluidity and flexibility in their demeanor to stay safe and find joy in the city.

Simmons organizes *Crescent City Girls* thematically and seamlessly weaves three analytic categories, cultural geography, the history of sexuality, and affect studies, into each chapter to explore the different aspects of the double bind. She uses the field of cultural geography to show the ways in which the physical environment determined black girls' experiences in the city, the neighborhoods where they encountered verbal taunts and sexual harassment, and those areas where they could enjoy social interactions and obtain emotional support. In chapter 1, Simmons argues that in order to survive, black girls had to develop mental maps of their surroundings, distinguish the areas where they did and did not belong, and frequently adjust their understanding of the city according to neighborhood changes. They "were constantly figuring out their proper place and the attendant meanings of the spaces they inhabited" (p. 52). To stay safe from street harassment, the focus of chapter 2, they had to deliberately choose which areas to visit and which to avoid. Yet even in safer areas, along mostly black Rampart Street, "some black girls walked along the street undisturbed, while others were harassed" (p. 69).

Using sexuality and affect studies helps Simmons support the second half of her argument on the double bind. Black girls had to withstand the social expectations among the white and black middle class of sustaining chastity and respectability. Simmons discusses several methods black girls used to deal with the burdens of facing

uninvited sexual aggression while remaining pure. Some black girls, such as the rape victims discussed in chapter 3, assumed the responsibility of maintaining respectability by keeping silent about the attack. Even the black press, Simmons shows, had a hand in perpetuating the social expectations by making the respectability of Hattie McCray, who was killed by a white patrolman, "the most important element of her tragic story," rather than her death (p. 98). Chapter 4 illustrates how black girls sought to survive the double bind by assuming a reputation as a "nice girl"—"a polite euphemism for sexually and morally wholesome"—and concealing their complex, human feelings (p. 111).

Simmons further complicates the double bind in the last two chapters of her work. In chapter 5, she compellingly discusses the consequences black girls faced when voluntarily or involuntarily crossing the line of respectability. Allegedly sexually delinquent, "bad" girls were sent to the House of the Good Shepherd to be rehabilitated by the nuns through religious moral instruction and domestic work. Yet, in spite of the double bind and the simplistic, binary groupings of "good" and "bad" girls, black girls sought outlets for self-expression, creativity, and pleasure, the subject of chapter 6. They took part in a literary culture, joined social events, and created fantasy or make-believe worlds at YWCA dances and Mardi Gras. During an era that sought to stifle their individuality and imagination, black girls developed the skills to navigate an often unsafe environment and deal with near-impossible expectations of purity and respectability, and in so doing, they established spaces to express their own creativity and individuality. *Crescent City Girls* skillfully shows as much about black girls' experiences and behaviors as American society's assumptions and misconceptions of black girls themselves and the geographic, cultural, and social forces at work to maintain white male supremacy in Jim Crow New Orleans.

Note

[1]. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

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