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Michele Mitchell. *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xxi + 388 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5567-6; \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2902-8.

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Looking Forward

With superb research and dynamic analysis, Michele Mitchell has offered a provocative new interpretation of African-American racial uplift ideas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She has consulted a wide variety of sources—from conduct manuals and church records to toys and travelogues, from sociological treatises and newspaper columns to diaries to dolls—to unveil a deeply gendered and classed movement for racial uplift. From the disastrous end of Reconstruction to the rise of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), aspiring black women and men sought to assure a prosperous collective destiny for African Americans. In the process, these reformers and leaders drew upon and manipulated a host of broader trends in science and culture, including social Darwinism, eugenic theories, and class stratification. All the while, they demonstrated and crafted concepts of the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and racial identities. The racial destiny, as Mitchell shows, both real and imagined, was split on gender and class lines for these aspiring African Americans.

Mitchell’s tour through black America takes her to numerous destinations. She begins with the migration fever at the end of Reconstruction, as thousands of African Americans considered leaving the South for the Midwest or for Liberia. The Liberia Exodus Association, for instance, maintained that exiting the United States (and all of its horrors from the lynching of black men to the raping of black women) could rehabilitate black men’s sexuality. The War of 1898 and the rise of Euro-

pean and American interest in the continent of Africa then posed a gendered conundrum for African Americans. As white men and nations obtained their “manhood” by subjugating other lands and peoples, could disadvantaged black men gain their manhood by following the same path? Could they, in short, become less oppressed by oppressing others? It was a difficult question of manhood, Mitchell shows, one that led a host of African-American men to debate the merits and demerits of joining the imperialist mission.

At the turn of the century, Mitchell identifies a crucial transformation in African Americans’ arguments for racial improvement. Between 1890 and 1910, she suggests, African-American reformers shifted from primarily attacking outside forces and instead turned to internal ones. Rather than exert their energies against residential segregation, these reformers endeavored to purify black homes; rather than fight Jim Crow cars, they advocated cleaner cribs; rather than denounce lynchings, they patrolled black sexuality. In short, aspiring African-American women and men seemed more interested in policing black life than they were in challenging and overturning the white supremacist social structure that had emerged.

This internal focus led aspiring blacks to push for a variety of community reforms. They watched sexual behavior and social conduct; black women were instructed to find good, honest, hard-working men with whom to have families; black men were told not to sleep around.

Together, these manly men and womanly women would have bright-eyed and brilliant children. Conduct manuals shouted to young black women, “Don’t!” when given the opportunity for pre-marital sex or alcohol use. Newspapers held baby contests to judge the best and most intelligent-looking offspring. Families bought “colored” dolls for their daughters to instill race pride. Black sociologists like W. E. B. Du Bois endeavored to inspire fellow African Americans to have clean homes, respectful children, and community pride. Then, in the UNIA, black women were discouraged from the association’s political activity, and told time and again that they must refrain from any sexual or social contact with white men.

Mitchell is at her best when demonstrating the gendered elements of the racial uplift crusades. The goals of these aspiring reformers rarely, if ever, constituted equal civil rights for black men and black women. Mitchell effectively moves beyond the work of Kevin Gaines, whose *Uplifting the Race* (1996) certainly revealed a gendered component to racial uplift rhetoric, yet did little more than show that black leaders were patriarchal.[1] Mitchell, to her credit, does a more effective job than Gaines of historically and contextually situating the decisions and ideas of these men and women. As Mitchell shows, for example, baby contests and the drive for home improvements were in conversation with broader eugenic and eugenics scientific movements advanced by whites and blacks alike.

Professor Mitchell also has a brilliant eye for the evocative vignette. The stories of women like Anna Logan, who had her sights set on Liberia in 1891 with her two daughters, are not only informative, but riveting. The Logan family ultimately decided against emigration, because of the tales they heard of young black women accosted on the journey. Mitchell should be applauded for finding so many of these tales and recounting them so well.

Mitchell’s intense focus on notions of the race’s future, however, may blind her from a concomitant emphasis on the past emerging at this historical moment. The push for racial uplift was Janus-faced—looking forward toward the race’s destiny and looking backward for race pride and evidence of “Negro” culture. W. E. B. Du

Bois’s sociological works, for example, were matched by his historical ones. In fact, it is oftentimes difficult to discern whether Du Bois’s monographs were historical or sociological. In most of them, such as *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois linked past and present external discrimination with the inner habits and customs of black folk to explain the situation and offer remedies for the future. For all intents and purposes, the early twentieth century witnessed the birth of African-American history, and the intent was to speak to the destiny of the race. As Carter Woodson explained in 1922 of his plans for *The Journal of Negro History*, “We have a wonderful history behind us.... It reads like the history of people in a heroic age. We expect to send out from time to time books written for the express purpose of showing you that you have a history, a record, behind you.... Let us, then, study this history, and study it with the understanding that we are not, after all, an inferior people, but simply a people who have been set back, a people whose progress has been impeded.... It is not going to be long before we can so sing the story to the outside world as to convince it of the value of our history and our traditions, and then we are going to be recognized as men.”[2]

Incorporating the rise of African-American history as a scholarly discipline would add to Mitchell’s superb analysis. She has offered a penetrating social and intellectual history, one that mixes the global and the local, the racial and the gendered, the sacred and the profane, and all with an eye to nuance, individual experience, and broad trends. While undergraduates may have a difficult time with some of the prose and the seemingly endless array of examples, most upper-level students in African-American history courses would benefit from *Righteous Propagation*. Anyone interested in African American history and understanding life for black Americans from 1870 to 1930 should read this book.

Notes

[1]. Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[2]. Carter G. Woodson, “Some Things Negroes Need to Do,” *Southern Workman* 51 (January 1922): 33-36.

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