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Cheryl D. Hicks. *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiv + 372 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3424-4; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7162-1.

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African American Women and Working-Class Respectability

Since the proliferation of scholarship on African American women's reform efforts, the notion of respectability has come to shape how African American women sought to present themselves to the world. Not only a matter of dignity and self-respect, portraying the image of the respectable woman was a strategy of self-protection in a white world that insisted black women were immoral and available for abuse and exploitation. Respectability, however, was always a concept steeped in middle-class ideas of proper behavior. Cheryl D. Hicks expands both the reach of respectability and its definition in *Talk with You Like A Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935.*

Hicks seeks to shift the focus of the query from the ideas of middle-class reformers, to how their ideas and strategies shaped the lives of their working-class sisters. Using a wide variety of sources, especially the records of the women imprisoned in the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford and the New York State Prison for Women at Auburn, she is able to piece together the lives, strategies, and negotiations of African American women as they faced common crises. Importantly, Hicks argues that working-class black women, whether migrants from the South, the Caribbean, or the New York area, had well-defined notions of respectable behavior. Their ideas were not imposed from above, and did conflict with more elite notions of behavior. As a set of defining elements, the form of respectable womanhood they insisted on was composed of a commitment to hard work and support of family, piety, and sexual restraint.

The efforts of working women to craft their own identities and strategies for survival stood in stark tension and competed with white stereotypes of black women's innate natures, and the the inherit, almost natural, assumptions of white-oriented institutions designed to police behavior. Whether they faced police harassment or sought the help of the state to control wayward daughters, African American women found the court system, prison system, and reform structures unresponsive to their needs. Nevertheless, African American women used their definitions of respectability to gain leverage in maneuvering in institutions that assumed respectability was impossible for black, and especially poor, women. The varied groups of women that Hicks restores to the historical debate about race and reform both accepted and resisted state ideologies that sought to shape working-class behavior, and in the process sought to claim first-class citizenship.

In tracing their lives,, Hicks is able to illuminate the experiences of poor, African American women who often slip through the cracks of the historical record. Their experiences demonstrate the fractures not only in relations across the color line, but within the African American community as well. While class divisions among elite and working-class blacks are expected, Hicks also examines the conflicts within class structures, as African Americans sought to define dignity and meaning for themselves. She outlines the shifting lines of alliances that allowed black women's kin to seek the help of the state in controlling errant young black women, and simultaneously challenge its assumptions.

Hicks uses the records of reformers and the criminal justice system to make her case, inviting criticism that the women she analyzes, because of their presence in reform institutions, are not representative of the experiences of the majority of African Americans in New York at the time. She counters this challenge by suggesting that the experiences of these women reflect the common dilemmas that working-class women faced. While winding up in prison might not have been the most common result, the details in the case files nonetheless put the lives of working-class black women under the microscope, giving us the fuller picture of the struggles, strategies, and strivings of these women.

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