



Treva B. Lindsey. *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, DC.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 204 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08251-1.

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Activism by African Americans and allies in response to white supremacist movements over the past few years has prompted a resurgence in public interest in the Civil War and Reconstruction, and in black history generally. This is an auspicious time in black scholarship, not least of all because of the work of black feminist scholars like Treva B. Lindsey. Her work builds on a recent bloom of new studies by and about black women that seek to reinterpret accepted narratives of black history, whether older, white-centered interpretations or more recent, male-centered ones. *Colored No More* depicts Washington, DC in the thick of the era historian Rayford Logan once called the “nadir in American race relations,” overturning existing periodizations and oversimplifications of black oppression under Jim Crow law. By focusing on the breadth of activism and personal work performed by black women to better themselves and their opportunities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lindsey brings a sharp focus to important subjects and methodologies in US social history.

As a history, Lindsey’s study adds depth and specificity to the historiography of women in the nation’s capital and the outsized role that black women there played in national consciousness-raising and organizing. But where *Colored No More* really pushes scholarship forward is in its

deliberate and studied engagement with feminist theory and the dynamics of intersectionality. While scholars are increasingly familiar with the black feminist critique that overlapping oppressions like racism and sexism must be addressed in tandem, relatively few have sorted out productive ways to accomplish that in practice. *Colored No More* joins other recent efforts like Danielle McGuire’s *At the Dark End of the Street* (2011), Crystal Feimster’s *Southern Horrors* (2011), and Ashley D. Farmer’s *Remaking Black Power* (2017) in centering not only black women as subjects but also black women’s own interpretations of their experiences.

Lindsey’s presentation of DC black women’s self-fashioning around the turn of the twentieth century is grounded in two important contributions to African American social history. Historians have noted how the term “colored” “became synonymous with ... racial segregation and antiblack racial subjugation” and led to the emergence of “New Negro” ideas, but have largely propelled “a masculinist ... historical narrative of African American lived experiences in the Jim Crow era.” That narrative has tended to represent women (if at all) as “battered, brutalized, raped, and assailed” bodies in need of restitution, important primarily for the ways they shaped black men’s experiences. It is not enough, however, to

assert “women were there too,” Lindsey writes: she argues that the term “colored” must be understood as a “historically specific, racialized *and* gendered identity.” When black women embraced “New Negro Womanhood” they rejected “the third-class status of Colored woman” for a title of distinction and renewal. That cultural work included explicit criticisms of African American “masculinism and heteropatriarchy in black communities” (pp. 10-12) and “sought to undo intraracial policing of black women’s lives” (p. 20).

In addition to a reframing of terms, Lindsey argues for a recalibration of scholars’ temporal location of the “New Negro era,” the period of energetic intraracial development in which adherents engaged in what Henry Louis Gates Jr. called “a bold and audacious act of language, signifying the will to power, to dare to recreate a race by renaming it” (quoted, p. 8). Many scholars have considered this a twentieth-century interwar phenomenon, pinning it next to ideas about the Harlem Renaissance and black nationalism in the American imaginary. While historians have begun to slough off the old idea that a “nadir” in race relations meant a corresponding lack of activism and hope in black people, a male-centered framing of African American experience has continued to measure progress and action according to the public activities of male leadership. Lindsey corrects this reading of the period, pointing to earlier women like Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who in the 1890s pressed against the failures of Reconstruction, prompting a “distinct historical moment for African American women” to imagine a “New Negro womanhood” (pp. 13-14). Lindsey’s consideration of intellectual contributions by black women prompts her to expand and complicate the periodization of postbellum black activism that has typically centered on later male thinkers like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey.

Lindsey’s sources extend well beyond party politics, government statistics, or published lectures, integrating the broad experiences of black life in a growing and modernizing city. Lindsey interrogates the Victorian stereotypes of the “politics of respectability” that, while important to tracing the rights struggles of the early twentieth century, can conceal as much as they reveal about real black people. She describes both women “who viewed these respectability politics as elitist” and complicated by class, and others “who invested in hyperperformances of feminine propriety to render themselves politically significant and visible.” The author’s regard for both the ideas and the aesthetics of New Negro womanhood creates a rich picture of black women who measured their well-being and demanded respect “on a spectrum of terms, although not in identical ways” (p. 17). Lindsey’s investigation of Howard University culture, African American women playwrights, and the black woman suffrage movement show the breadth and personality of the era’s activists. Her consideration of beauty culture is especially intriguing for its probing of the linkages between public and private presentations of race, intraracial class dynamics, and the logic of early advertisements for black consumers. “Black women in growing urban centers such as Washington began crafting a black-women-centered public sphere,” Lindsey concludes, “in which their voices, images, tastes and perspectives thrived almost immediately after Emancipation” (p. 85).

Colored No More provokes important questions for African American historiography and should inform historians’ telling of urban black history after the Civil War. But beyond its traditional scholarly contributions, Lindsey’s work demonstrates a black feminist praxis that should inspire interdisciplinary scholars in the work of making social history relevant and legible beyond academia. Lindsey is precise and explicit in her interpretation of sources but seems also to recognize the present-day consequences of that interpretation. Raising broader questions than a tradi-

tional “community study” might dare, Lindsey asks how black women grappled “simultaneously with multiple oppressive ideologies.” She considers “what spaces were integral to struggling against” those ideologies, and seeks to understand how black women understood “the modern world and their status within it” (p. 143). While there is much for scholarship to gain from Lindsey’s investigation of these questions, there is clearly much for modern Americans to learn as well from finding answers to these questions for the granddaughters of DC’s “New Negro Women.” “Our freedom struggles continue,” Lindsey remarks, “but I believe that we will win” (p. xiv).

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