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UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3mw699nw>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 28(1)

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Publication Date

2017

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BOOK REVIEWS

Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans. By LaKisha Michelle Simmons. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2015. Pp. 266. \$29.95, paperback.

For Dolores Aaron, a young black teenager growing up in Jim Crow New Orleans, shopping in the Big Easy's main commercial district of Canal Street was "the worst thing in the world." The harassment she encountered by white males on the street and the mistreatment she suffered at the hands of white female personnel in the stores were so harrowing that later in life she still refused to patronize any department stores in New Orleans and opted to order her clothes from black-owned retailers in Los Angeles (64). Through the oral recollections of Dolores Aaron and other black women who grew up in Jim Crow New Orleans, as well as a multitude of archival sources, historian LaKisha Michelle Simmons's *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* examines the "gendered violence of segregation" and its effects on the "inner lives" of black girls in New Orleans during the period from 1930 to 1954 (3). Central to Simmons's work is the notion of the *double bind*, a concept she defines as the dual constraint on the black girls of New Orleans from the controls of Jim Crow segregation and the influence of ideas of respectability from the black middle class. Simmons's main argument is that this double bind circumscribed the lives of black girls in most aspects of their daily lives and was instrumental in the formation of their interior lives (4).

Divided into six chapters, Simmons's work revolves around the three major themes of geography, black female sexuality, and affect, with the burden of the double bind interwoven throughout the book. As Simmons affirms in the introduction, geography or place is at the heart of *Crescent City Girls*, and her book "is as much a story about New Orleans as it is about girlhood" (11). She notes that for black girls in New Orleans and other Southern cities and towns, "urban geography functioned as a teacher," and taught black girls the meaning of *colored* (51). Through the geography of neighborhoods, building placement, and the division of uptown and downtown—a porous demarcation between black Americans and black Creoles, respectively—black girls developed mental maps that helped them comprehend spatial power within the city and delimit safe spaces as well

as places of exclusion (26-27, 30-31, 42). Paradoxically, what one might surmise to be *negative* spaces, such as nightclubs, dance halls, and rooming houses, often were locales of empowerment and freedom where black females could find pleasure, areas of the city where they felt less tightly the strictures of the double bind (179).

With respect to the theme of black female sexuality, Simmons demonstrates the nexus of the sexual violence of Jim Crow and the pressures placed on black girls by their community's expectations of respectability. She details the horrific crime of the killing of Hattie McCray, a black girl of fourteen, by a white police officer in 1930. The subsequent trial and conviction of the police officer, Charles Guerand, was significant in that it exposed publicly the sexual abuse of black girls by white men in New Orleans (93-96). Devoting a chapter to the House of the Good Shepherd, a community of Catholic nuns often appointed by the courts to reform "wayward girls," Simmons presents the sisters as complicit in the stigmatization of black female sexuality. Though she notes correctly that the convent was biracial but not integrated, and that black girls were trained exclusively as domestics for white families, Simmons makes a less-compelling case that the Catholic religious institute was an extension of Jim Crow in which issues of sexuality relating to black girls under its care were treated substantially different from those of white girls (146-49).

For the theme of affect, Simmons draws on contemporary studies to uncover the emotions or subjective feelings of black girls in New Orleans. The author makes use of the sociological works and interviews of girls in New Orleans done by Allison Davis, John Dollard, and Charles S. Johnson for the Negro Youth Study (NYS) of the 1930s. Though these interviews often reveal the girls' pains, fears, and anxieties, Simmons criticizes what she perceives as flaws in the studies, noting that the interviewers for the NYS held gendered notions of what constituted rational fear and failed to treat the girls they interviewed as fully human (110-12, 118-40). Simmons also gives a chapter-length treatment of pleasure in the lives of black girls. She argues that the reading and writing of romance stories and poetry by black girls served as a haven that helped to elicit feelings of enjoyment and intimacy, sentiments that were instrumental in creating some sense of normality which helped them endure the hardships of Jim Crow New Orleans (176-89). She also cites the spectacles of make-believe performances at the YMCA and the celebrations of Mardi Gras as significant sources of respite that afforded black girls "an alternate world to the segregated streets" of Jim Crow New Orleans (190-205).

Simmons's methodology in the formation of this work makes use of *disciplined imagination*, a complement to traditional archival research whereby the researcher attempts to access the "emotional inner worlds that historians often assume are inaccessible in the archive" (10). In an effort to make "black female lives and suffering visible," it was necessary for Simmons to draw on a broad range of sources, and she acknowledges that the nature of her archival choices

shaped the methodology for her research (216). These sources include oral histories, black and white newspapers, education records, police and delinquency home records, autobiographies, and the reports of social workers and social scientists (18). Since most readers are not likely to comprehend fully the dehumanizing effects of segregation, the power of a first-hand voice in conveying the trauma of segregation is crucial to this work. But while oral histories are perhaps the most effective sources used by the author for the power of their frankness, the author also engages with “moments of silence” or the “method of reading silence,” a technique to coax out of the source what she believes to be concealed (15).

Simmons credits historian Darlene Clark Hine with addressing in the late 1980s a significant gap in the historiography of the African-American experience concerning the effects of violence on the “inner lives” of black females (6). In contrast to earlier works within the historiography of childhood and segregation, Simmons remarks that her concentration on a single urban area engages the topic of the subjective nature of space more thoroughly. She identifies weaknesses in Jennifer Ritterhouse’s *Growing Up Jim Crow* (2006) and Susan Cahn’s *Southern Reckonings* (2012), with the former focusing too narrowly on the dictates of etiquette acquired through the plantation paradigm and the latter’s inability to delineate satisfactorily the disparate nature of urban and rural space (13).

There is no doubt that Simmons diligently gathered a copious amount of evidence for white male culpability in the mistreatment and marginalization of black females in New Orleans. Nevertheless, one wonders if Simmons neglects the influence of *intraracial* harassment and violence perpetrated by black males against black females, and if she focuses too heavily on “respectability” with respect to the gender politics within the black community in the formation of black female subjectivity. Though she mentions a few important black male authority figures, such as Lucien Alexis, principal of the McDonogh #35 High School, Simmons fails to address adequately the role of black males within the black community of New Orleans during this period, often leaving the reader to ponder the influence, or lack thereof, of black males on the development of the lives of young black females. Moreover, despite its enormous impact on Americans during the first decade of her study, Simmons scarcely mentions the Great Depression in any depth, especially its pernicious effects on minorities.

As an interdisciplinary scholar, Simmons does an admirable job in utilizing a variety of academic disciplines to further her analyses of the subjects of *Crescent City Girls*. However, the limits of intersectionality theory in the writing of history are discernible in this work. Like many works that involve intersectionality, the bugbear of *class* is always there alongside *race*, despite the minimization of this crucial aspect of the experiences of black girls, both Creole and American, within the social dynamics of the black community. And while the “disciplined imagination” served Simmons well as a complement to the conventional interpretation of sources, it should never supplant archival

materials that offer more substance in the construction of effective histories. Notwithstanding these observations, Simmons's work is a significant testament to Jim Crow's effects on black females and its continuing influence on the present racial climate.

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