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[Review of] Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective

Reviewed by Sheila R. Phipps

Abstract: Book Review

Arising from an academic symposium at Converse College in 2001, the essays in this collection investigate the possible trends for southern women in the new century by tracing developments from Reconstruction to the present. Using various methods and approaches, all authors seem to arrive at the conclusion that, at least by the last quarter of the twentieth century, the meaning of "southern" has dwindled to one of geography more than any other characteristic. Although southern distinctions might be disappearing for the future, many of the contributors to this collection offer suggestions for further investigation of the past.

In an interesting essay that offers a complex picture of southern women's economic life, Jacqueline Jones argues that most of women's past economic activities do not appear on tax lists or in census reports, making their labors more difficult to measure. What is known is that, prior to 1950, a higher proportion of southern women compared to women of other regions worked in agriculture. Jones finds that, by the 1960s, racial divisions of labor in the South began to fade as industry and diversified farming replaced the single-crop economy. By the 1970s, gendered divisions of labor also decreased as women looked for support from the 1964 Civil Rights Act to move into traditionally male jobs such as mining and construction. Jones predicts that the twenty-first century will witness fewer regional distinctions for southern women due to more involvement in the global economy.

Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman argues persuasively that southern women's political activism did not take male forms because such action would have been too threatening to the white male power structure. This forced southern women to use such subtle means to influence law and policy that many of their efforts are left out of the scholarship. Wilkerson-Freeman points out that the first issues of importance to women, such as education, welfare, and gender equity, barely addressed by the majority in the nineteenth century, cannot be ignored by national political parties today, suggesting that women's political participation has been successful and

deserves further study.

Although women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and Rosa Parks have received attention from scholars, Barbara A. Woods suggests that there is still a large piece missing from the story of the civil rights movement. Woods offers a model for future research in the field by comparing the experiences of six lesser-known black and white women. In her intimate look at these women, Woods finds that both black and white women were driven by spirituality to work for civil rights, but that black women enjoyed more support from their families than did the white women involved in the movement. Woods suggests that understanding the individual motives and struggles to fight injustice faced by southern women in the past will likely lead more women to unite to correct present social problems.

Amy Thompson McCandless compares debates over race segregation in education to arguments against Canada and the United States 1597 single-sex educational facilities, focusing primarily on two publicly supported male institutions of higher education: Virginia Military Institute and the Citadel. When women demanded entrance to these schools, compromise solutions were offered, incorporating auxiliary programs into nearby private women's academies. Eventually, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that these "separate" compromises were not "equal." Unless female students experienced the strenuous regimen demanded of male students, they could not expect to achieve the leadership skills they sought. Although both formerly all-male institutions have fallen into stable coeducational operations, McCandless argues that "separate but equal" arguments relative to both race and sex will persist in the twenty-first-century South.

Southern distinctions for rural women, according to volume coeditor Melissa Walker, have come from resistance to agricultural diversification, the crop-lien system, racial oppression, and the slow rate of growth in industrial alternatives for employment in the South. World wars caused the rural South to lose population as tenant farmers moved into industrial employment. New Deal programs and allotments provided relief more for large than small landowners and, in fact, pushed many tenants and sharecroppers from the land. Although many southern women still live in rural areas, most commute to nonagricultural employment in nearby urban areas.

A racially and ethnically diverse South has been obscured by a cultural fiction, according to Anne Goodwyn Jones. Until various theoretical methods began breaking open southern texts, the region appeared to be a binary society, white/black, rich/poor, a myth that Jones believes was fostered by the "fathers' voices" to maintain control over society. In her own intriguing study, Jones has located patriarchal fiction even in the works of southern women writers who, although known for featuring the voices of women of other races, remained controlled by patriarchal dominance. Jones predicts that the South's true diversity, what she calls "a publicly poly-vocal South," will continue to emerge through closer examination of text (p. 180).

Nancy A. Hardesty argues that southern distinctions for women relative to religion derive in part from the fact that a majority of the nation's Baptists reside in the region and that the South

has proved more resistant to the ordination of women. Although major denominations split over the issue of abolition in the nineteenth century, most of the national churches reunited by 1987, with the exception of the Southern Baptist Convention, which also continues to refuse leadership positions to women. As migration increases into the region in the twenty-first century, Hardesty predicts that the South will become more spiritually diverse, and she believes that southern women will continue to demand more gender equality in church leadership.

The solid scholarship in these articles suffers at times from the authors' failure to clearly define the "southernness" of their subjects, although the sum of the essays convinces the reader that southern distinctions seem to be disappearing. As Carol K. Blesser states in her conclusion, "by 2050, there will not be a separate southern women's culture; there will be only an American culture with no significant differences for women, north or south" (p. 232). The work of historians, however, is not to predict the future as much as to interpret the past; the most impressive offerings in this collection are the suggestions for further research that will provide a more complete and complex picture of southern women's history.

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