

Review of *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* by Leslie Brown

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* by Leslie Brown.

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Article:

Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South by Leslie Brown. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008; 472 pp.; paperbound, \$24.95.

Upbuilding Black Durham traces the fractious internal dynamics of the African American community in Durham, North Carolina that Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and E. Franklin Frazier all praised as an example of black economic success and solid middle class attainments in Jim Crow America. According to Leslie Brown, black business leaders and educators became community leaders and “fueled the emergence of respectability as a hegemonic ideology of black aspirations—an allegiance to temperance, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals” (35). The conservative men who promulgated these goals—men like Charles C. Spaulding of the North Carolina Mutual and James E. Shepard of the North Carolina College for Negroes—came of age with the bloody lessons of the 1898 Wilmington Massacre in mind and remained committed Washingtonians their whole lives. But their vision

for race relations did not accommodate the lived experience of the mass of black workers in Durham, particularly the large number of female employees of the tobacco factories. Working women developed strategies for resistance to segregation that included frequent migration and regular switching of employment from domestic service to factory work and back, and otherwise creating a lifestyle at odds with bourgeois values of Durham's black upper class. Eventually, generational differences played on the inter-black dynamic, as young professional men in the 1930s advocated a more aggressive political agenda for civil rights work and factory laborers looked to unions to bring about equalization of pay and working conditions. The younger generation had seen the altogether negligible effects of accommodation on the diffusion of racism and segregation. The old guard did not leave the stage so easily. The black patricians discouraged union membership and assembled the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs to address local voting rights and educational issues in an effort to head off the organization of a more confrontational local branch of the NAACP.

Brown's gender analysis helps sharpen the differences between Durham's upper-class black men and the community's professional and working-class women. That is not to say those relationships were a simple matter of conservative versus progressive approaches to civil rights activism. "Rather," Brown writes, "the interrelated structures of gender, class, and, over time, generation cast relationships, forged alliances, and fostered alienation among African Americans, creating interconnected, disjointed, and even contradictory relations between women and men and among the black working, middle, and elite classes, migrants and settlers, conservative elders and radical upstarts" (16). Elsewhere, as Robert Rogers Korstad notes in *Civil Rights Unionism*, black organizing efforts in Winston-Salem's tobacco factories were stymied by hostile owners. Brown suggests that conservative black leadership hindered unionizing efforts in Durham. Korstad's Winston-Salem unionists ultimately succeeded because they tapped into the dense community network, where Durham's failed because of the complex divisions.

Though *Upbuilding Black Durham* is an academic book, it will be of use to public historians. At first, a few negligible inaccuracies might catch the eye of the local historian: Bennett Place is not *north* of Durham, it is west; Julian Carr was not a *Confederate* colonel, he was an enlisted man and was only an officer in the United Confederate Veterans after the war. Overall, Brown's book is valuable for two larger reasons. First, she introduces a wealth of previously underused sources to our local collective memory. For instance, both United States Department of Labor records and the archives of the Tobacco Workers' International Union prove incredibly revealing of the work lives of common black women in Durham's tobacco factories. Brown, a former researcher with the Duke Center for Documentary Studies' "Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South" project, fully exploits that archive's extensive collection of interviews and community contacts. Several privately held collections reveal details such as the minutes for the Volkamenia Literary Club, and obituaries and clippings from long-defunct church newsletters and newspapers. Second, as Durham currently entertains at least two grass-roots efforts to create local history museums (the Parish Street Project and the Museum of

Durham History), planners will need this book not only for its treasury of sources, but as an interpretive guide in creating exhibits and programs based on the Bull City's vibrant, yet complicated, past.

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