Book Review: African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000

Michael Lansing

Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly

Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/241

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

This collection chronicles the longstanding and diverse experiences of African American women across the regional West through a series of essays by leading western historians. Together, they bring new depth to a subject often ignored. On issues ranging from race relations to labor relations and from working-class as well as upper-class perspectives, the volume carefully reconstructs and considers the role of black women in varied western contexts.

Arranged chronologically, the collection’s essays hold together well. The editors’ introduction situates the pieces that follow in relation to western, African American, and women’s historiographies. Peppered with short and appropriate primary documents related to the surrounding essays, the book insures that black women from the past speak for themselves. Especially useful pieces for GPQ readers include Debra S. McDonald’s “To Be Black and Female in the Spanish Southwest,” Peggy Riley’s “Women of the Great Falls African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1870-1910,” Susan Armitage’s “‘The Mountains Were Free and We Loved Them’: Dr. Ruth Flowers of Boulder, Colorado,” Moya B. Hansen’s “Try Being a Black Woman!: Jobs in Denver, 1900-1970,” Cheryl Brown Henderson’s “Lucinda Todd and the Invisible Petitioners of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas,” and Linda Williams Reese’s “Clara Luper and the Civil Rights Movement in Oklahoma City.”

As the title suggests, the editors and contributors make a clear analytical claim. In each of the pieces, African American women—regardless of particular circumstance—found that race in combination with gender proved the most important facet of their western experience. Consistently tackling racism and sexism with self-sacrifice and self-confidence, they not only contributed to western history but also shaped it through their individual confrontations. That so many of the essays resort to biography suggests the source limitations confronted—and transcended—by these historians as well as the work that remains to be done in this crucial subfield.

All told, the book succeeds in highlighting and reiterating the significance of African American women in western history. As the collection’s chronological scope suggests, these women did not suddenly appear on the western scene at any given moment—they were in the thick of the region’s most crucial dynamics from the beginning.

MICHAEL LANSING
Western Historical Quarterly
Utah State University