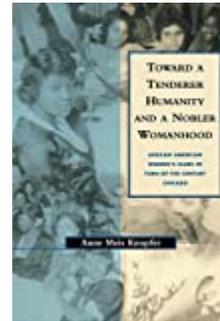


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne Meis Knupfer. *Toward A Tenderer Humanity and Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1996. x + 209 pp.

Anne Meis Knupfer. *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1996. x + 209 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-4691-2; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4671-4.



Reviewed by Janette Thomas Greenwood (Clark University)

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Grounded in exhaustive research in Chicago's black newspapers, manuscript collections, and association records, Anne Meis Knupfer's book explicates the richness, vitality, and diversity of African American women's clubs. The author uncovered over 150 black women's clubs active in Chicago between 1890 and 1920, and she documents the broad range of their activities and the significant contributions they made to community life. Acknowledging her debt to the path-breaking work of historians and sociologists of black club women, such as Darlene Clark Hine and Patricia Hill Collins, Knupfer attempts to build on their work while taking her study in new directions. By employing "three interlocking frameworks" of analysis—a Weberian social stratification model, community ethics, and feminist scholarship—Knupfer successfully captures a diversity of voices, perspectives and agendas, not only among black club women but also in the rapidly expanding and differentiating communities that made up black Chicago at the turn of the century. While complicating the story of black club women and black Chicago at large, Knupfer's study at times falls short, especially in its failure to critique more

fully the middle-class agenda of club women and their relationship with the poor.

Knupfer convincingly demonstrates throughout her book that black club women are not easily categorized. Labels such as "conservative," "elite," "traditional" and "radical" do not do justice to ideologies and discourses that were "largely resilient and transformative" as well as "adaptive to audience, purpose, and sociopolitical constraints" (p. 28). While their rhetoric was often conservative, particularly with its focus on issues of home life, motherhood, and children, club women "drew from distinct African American community traditions," that connected club women as "other mothers" to issues of community welfare, which in turn, often led club women to advocate woman's suffrage and participation in city politics (p. 28). The plethora of club activity that Knupfer documents in this book—from clubs emphasizing kindergartens and mothering to those engaged in municipal reform, health care, settlement houses and anti-lynching campaigns—attests to the wide range of issues and strategies that club women engaged.

Knupfer also situates the club movement within the context of the explosive growth of black Chicago at the beginning of the Great Migration. Club women faced new and sometimes overwhelming challenges to provide additional social services to assist newcomers. Moreover, the arrival of Southern blacks—who swelled black Chicago’s population by 148 percent between 1910 and 1920 alone—generated tensions among migrants and “old settlers,” reflected in the founding of clubs, such as “The Old Settlers Club.”

The author acknowledges both cultural and class tensions in black Chicago as well as the gulf that separated elite and middle-class club women from those they wished to help. Club membership provided status, distinguishing them from the rest of the community, while their activities linked them to the poor. Black women, she notes, selectively joined clubs based on “social class, neighborhoods, church affiliation, political persuasion, and common interests” (p. 24). Club and church activity served to distinguish club women from the rest of the community. At the same time, club women, Knupfer argues, through their ideology and uplift activities, managed to construct “various layers of sisterhood and allegiances to poorer race women” (p. 22) by employing a resilient and adaptive language that could speak across class and even regional lines.

While the author provides some evidence for “various layers of sisterhood,” she does not explore adequately how complicated, tense, and even limited sisterhood might be. Knupfer notes that club women could be patronizing—even disdainful—of those they wished to help. She quotes club woman Fannie Barrier Williams referring to Chicago’s “black belt” (inhabited mostly by poor Southern migrants), as “darkest Africa.” Yet the author might have explored more fully the implications of such attitudes. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham so effectively shows in *Righteous Discontent* (Harvard University Press, 1993), a middle-class vision, with an emphasis on “respectability,” could be forged into a double-edged sword: a weapon that could attack racial injustice but at the same time bludgeon those African Americans “who transgressed white middle-class propriety.”[1] Like Higginbotham’s church women, Chicago’s black club women, as Higginbotham explains, “never conceded that rejection of white middle-class values by poor blacks afforded survival strategies, in fact spaces of resistance, albeit different from their own.”[2]

Similarly, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity* does not give

the reader a sense of how the objects of uplift responded to the activities and agenda of club women. Knupfer carefully documents an array of “wholesome activities” (p. 102) provided by black settlement houses to lure youths from pool halls, street corners and saloons, and she describes “rescue homes” and homes for working girls as well as “don’t do” lists promulgated in black newspapers to educate recent Southern migrants on proper decorum and appearance. Again, Knupfer accepts this agenda uncritically and without examining how the poor responded to these programs. Farah Jasmine Griffin’s, *Who Set You Flowin’* powerfully demonstrates that migrants were anything but “passive ... objects of black middle-class paternalism,”[3] and that many resisted attempts by the black middle-class to “discipline” them and make them “respectable.” This, too, is part of the story of black club women.

Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood makes a number of important contributions, particularly in its thorough documentation of Chicago’s black women’s clubs and the wide range of their activities. But this study would have been enhanced by a more critical analysis of the club women’s values and programs that would take into account how that vision complicated relations with their poorer brothers and sisters. Moreover, this study would have been deepened by addressing resistance that club women’s activities may have engendered. A critique of the club women’s middle-class vision and an examination of resistance to their agenda does not discredit or downplay the significant contributions and achievements of black club women. Instead, these inclusions serve to flesh out their story more fully, reminding us not only of the complex nature of black communities themselves but also of the complications inherent in nearly any reform movement intent on improving the lives of others.

Notes

[1]. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

[2]. Ibid.

[3]. Farah Jasmine Griffin’s, *Who Set You Flowin’* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 107.

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