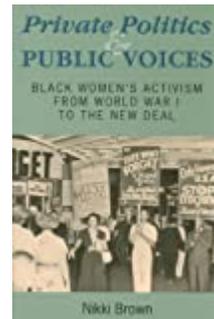




Nikki Brown. *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 192 pp.p Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34804-3.



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African American Women's Activism

In *Private Politics and Public Voices*, Nikki Brown examines African American women's efforts to organize and demand equality during and immediately following African American involvement in World War I. Brown weaves an impressive volume of primary research around useful summaries of earlier works on African American women in the early twentieth century. By integrating social and political history, Brown presents interesting insights into the organizational structures of organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and the Anti-Lynching Crusaders (ALC) as well as the motivations and aspirations of individual women who struggled to uplift their race through their volunteerism and activism. Ultimately, Brown concludes that African American women were central to wartime activism within the African American community and that though the 1920s witnessed a rise in what Brown terms "male normative institutions," African American women continued to play a vital role in

laying the foundation for the modern civil rights movement (p. 117).

Brown begins her study with an analysis African American women's activism on the home front. She details women's involvement throughout the country in rationing campaigns and the making of comfort kits for African American soldiers as well as women's protests against segregation in the armed services and acts of mob violence. Through this examination, Brown demonstrates that college-educated, middle-class women, particularly those in the NACW, used support of the war as a means to make evident their patriotism. They also sought to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the United States engaging in a war that sought to promote democracy abroad while upholding Jim Crow laws and doing little to prevent mob violence against African Americans at home.

In her second chapter, "Investigations of the Southern Black Working Class," Brown examines the experiences of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Mary Church Terrell as they investigated the unique character of wartime ac-

tivism in the South. This chapter provides valuable insights into the differing goals of southern, working-class women and their middle-class counterparts. According to Brown, the former group organized primarily to demand improved labor conditions and fair wages while the latter participated in patriotic endeavors that focused principally on civil rights. Brown also contributes to an understanding of race relations in the South during this time period, examining the realities of discrimination and racism within interracial organizations like the War Camp Community Service (WCCS), which was established to aid both white and black servicemen stationed in the South.

Those women who attempted to serve their country and their communities through the Red Cross and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) also faced discrimination and racism. In "Volunteering with the Red Cross and the YWCA," Brown explores the frustrations that African American women endured as they fought to gain access to these organizations. She also examines the continued mistreatment African American women faced once small numbers were allowed to participate in what were ultimately successful programs like the Hostess House Network. Brown contends that due to their experiences in these racially segregated charities, a growing number of African American women refused to compromise on issues of racial equality after their wartime service ended.

In her fourth chapter, "Supporting Black Doughboys in France," Brown uses the experiences of Addie Hunton and Kathryn Johnson, two YMCA secretaries who served in France in 1918 and 1919, to examine the effects that foreign service had on African American women's activism. Brown analyzes the effect of the army's segregation policies on African American servicemen and the female YMCA volunteers. Through this, Brown effectively paints a picture of veterans who were increasingly motivated and empowered to demand equality from the nation they had served.

Brown examines the shift in African American activism that occurred in the 1920s in "Gender Relations and the New Negro." In this chapter, Brown argues that while the NAACP replaced the NACW as the most powerful and active African American rights organization in this decade, African American women continued to be instrumental in the struggle for equality, particularly through the activities of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders. This chapter is especially valuable due to Brown's analysis of African American women's struggle to have

their unique issues addressed by the increasingly male-dominated black organizations of the 1920s as well as by white-dominated women's organizations like the League of Women Voters and the National Women's Party.

Despite the title "National Party Politics through the Depression," the final chapter of *Private Politics and Public Voices* primarily examines the anti-black rhetoric of the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century and the struggle that African American women faced in exercising their political rights in the 1920s. Brown contends that while white political leaders used various methods to disenfranchise African American women, they continued to exercise political power through the NACW and the National League of Republican Colored Women. However, in the final five pages of the book, Brown argues that it was the Democratic Party led by Franklin D. Roosevelt that ultimately capitalized on the powerful political network created by African American women.

The fact that a book subtitled "Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal" only addresses the decade of the 1930s in the final five pages and then primarily as a brief biography of Mary McLeod Bethune is unfortunately not the only distracting weakness of the work. The most troubling is that Brown appears to contradict herself in a number of places, particularly in her discussions of the NACW. One of the most glaring examples begins in chapter 2 when she contends that by the summer of 1919 "middle-class black women had abandoned their belief that the federal government had the power to compel states and white peoples to recognize the labors and humanity of African Americans" (p. 64). In the final chapters, Brown examines African American women's continued effort to influence national politics, including the legislative process surrounding the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, through both the NACW and the National League of Republican Colored Women, calling into question their loss of faith in the federal government. With its frequent focus on the NACW, this work would have benefited from a detailed discussion about the complexities of the organization that made such a dual nature possible.

An additional, though admittedly less substantive, problem is the redundancy of the examples used throughout the book. This issue is particularly glaring when a single quote is used twice in the final paragraph of page 43 and also when almost identical accounts of the Houston race riot of 1917 appear on both pages 26 and 98. This repetition is particularly troubling since page 26 states

that twelve whites were killed in the riot while the second account contends that seventeen whites died.

Despite these weaknesses, *Private Politics and Public Voices* provides an important contribution to the historiography of African American women. Brown effectively demonstrates the centrality of women's organizations and individual women's dedication particularly

to the cause of equal access to the ballot and the political process. Additionally, she shows the continuation of Progressive ideals and methods in the women's organizations of the 1920s and throughout her work highlights the ways in which these organizations provided a foundation for the civil rights activism that would follow World War II.

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