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Lisa G. Materson. *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 352 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-0089-5.

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Writing Race, Gender, and Electoral Politics into the Long Civil Rights Movement

The fifty years following Reconstruction were particularly oppressive for African American men and women, especially in the South. After the presidential election of 1876, when the last federal troops withdrew, former slaves, their children, and their grandchildren were left virtually unprotected. They faced severe poverty and brutal violence, and white supremacists were essentially free to deny the political rights guaranteed to them by the Reconstruction amendments. White southern Democrats used every tactic available, including terrorism, to keep black men from the polls. Black women, who had participated enthusiastically in political life during Reconstruction, now confronted increased subjugation and discrimination on the basis of both race and gender and were therefore doubly disenfranchised. Scholars have already examined these dynamics at length, characterizing the period as a ânadirâ of African American life in the United States. They have not, however, fully explored the ways that African American women in the North sought to alleviate this oppressive situation–an omission that Lisa G. Materson remedies with her book, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932*, which has recently been released in paperback.

Materson argues convincingly that middle-class African American women in the North devoted themselves to electoral politics in an effort to halt violence and oppression in the South. Determined to revive the political voices of black Americans, these women fought for a stronger federal government that would enforce the Reconstruction amendments. In part because of their experience with and knowledge of racist Democratic Party politics in the South, they worked to achieve this goal primarily by campaigning and voting for the Republican ticket–a decision that sometimes put them in difficult situations, as it did when they felt compelled to support Prohibition even as many African American voters opposed it.

Illinois makes an excellent case study. Materson notes that black women in Illinois found themselves at âthe crossroads of a great deal of national Republican traffic that passed through Chicagoâ and, at the same time, at âthe crossroads that connected southern and midwestern communitiesâ (p. 10). Therefore, though *For the Freedom of Her Race* focuses rather narrowly on Chicago politics, it actually has a much broader geographic relevance. One of the bookâs major strengths, in fact, is the way it connects the political work of northern black women with conditions in the South. Furthermore, since women in the state won suffrage, in stages, beginning in 1894, examining electoral politics in Illinois enables Materson to explore a wide array of political activities, including voting behavior. Using a straightforward chronological approach, she is, as a result, able to construct a clear narrative of northern, middle-class black womenâs political agency, beginning with their

support for the Republican Party in the late nineteenth century and concluding with the realignment that resulted in their support for Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats in the 1930s. Her assessment of that realignment is, indeed, one of the bookâs most significant contributions.

The entire project is exhaustively researched, and the complex narrative is rendered in careful detail. Readers might occasionally wish that Materson would step back from the detailed political story more frequently to offer some bigger-picture analysis. A deeper discussion of the connections between menâs and womenâs political activities, for instance, might have been illuminating: how did black womenâs political organizations and strategies compare to black menâs, and what else might the answer to that question reveal about the role of gender in electoral politics during the period? Still, Materson does offer much-needed perspective when it matters most. For example, she reflects at length on the fact that although middle-class black reformers were the key influential players in her story, these women sometimes ignored, alienated, or simply failed to reach many other African American women, especially those who lived in poverty and were not responsive to the ideology of racial uplift that remained so central to black womenâs organizations.

Matersonâs well-written and clearly organized study will prove useful to students and teachers of political history, womenâs history, and African American history. Though its focus is ostensibly narrow–on the surface, *For the Freedom of Her Race* is basically about black women and party politics in Chicago–it carries a much larger thematic relevance, connecting a history of Republican Party strategies with bigger questions about the intersections of race, class, and gender in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American life. Politically active African American women typically supported the Republicans, but they did not, Materson demonstrates, always simply trumpet the party line. Rather, they brought their individual ideas and experiences to their work on behalf of their race, working conscientiously within the northern political world to benefit their brothers and sisters in the South. This project is a significant one, demonstrating that these northern women deserve a bigger place in the history of the long civil rights movement.

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