

H-Net Reviews

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Ethel Morgan Smith. *From Whence Cometh My Help: The African American Community at Hollins College.* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000. xiii + 147 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1260-3.

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Distinguishing Genres: Celebratory Paeans vs. Social History

Hollins College, in Roanoke, Virginia, began as a female seminary, one of hundreds of nineteenth century adventures in women's education that have no exact analogue today. One Charles Lewis Cocke founded Hollins nearly two decades before the Civil War. As with many southern school-builders of his era, Cocke was a slaveholder, and therein lies the thread of a potentially insightful tale.

Cocke's slaves, along with, perhaps, the maid-servant slaves of the affluent young women attracted to his school, settled in quarters not far from the campus. In the process, those African Americans founded a separate community of service workers for Hollins College that has existed from that day to this. They and their descendants served as the washerwomen, maids, janitors, cooks, gardeners, and waiters for over a century. The washerwomen and maids have been largely displaced by automation and a general decline in the acceptability of intimate personal services – most young white women in the last forty years have probably made their own beds, folded their own clothes or sent them out to professional laundries; waiters, along with the venerable black headwaiter, have been displaced by the cafeteria. Yet dining hall and maintenance work, along with lower level clerical work, remains the province of a largely black staff at Hollins College, though fewer of the black workers at Hollins College still live in the Hollins Community.

One can hardly crack the covers of this book without being struck by its potential. There simply is no histori-

cal literature on the relationship between institutions of higher education and their workers – at least those workers below the status of professor. In the nineteenth century, those workers would have included teachers' and students' personal servants, bound or free, along with small armies of butlers, room-maids, fire-tenders, washerwomen, cooks, and the many other ill-paid and often invisible workers that allowed the leisure for their social superiors to study; in the South, particularly, it is likely that the bound servants among them would have lived apart from the students they served, perhaps in some sort of community relationship.

There is potential here, in other words, to launch an entirely new and important line of inquiry. What can we discover of those whose lives, livelihoods, and communities made possible the life of the mind for others? What were the economic implications of such work and communities for the viability of large sectors of higher education – how dependent was the expansion of access to higher learning on poorly paid services? In what forms did the communities survive, if they did? What sorts of lives did these workers create for themselves? Did the workers avail themselves, surreptitiously perhaps, of the cultural feast surrounding them, or did the class relationships constantly imposed upon them more often generate an understandable anti-intellectualism and resentment of privilege? In the latter regard, at least two of Ethel Morgan Smith's subjects clearly gained broad culture from their years with the college. Significantly, the vital "etiquette" of southern race relations demanded

that they efface their own learning through double-edged self-mockery, and, for one at least, taught a damning racial hatred that would not allow him to serve a visiting black African dignitary. With unintended irony, Smith quotes one of her interviewees remarking that this man “‘was the head colored man around these parts. And he only served white folks’” (p. 67).

Unfortunately, Smith misses the importance of those two men as symbol and archetype, just as she misses the other potential contributions of her work. She certainly had the material with which to build an insightful study. Drawing on methodologies from several decades of social history, combined with rich sources she did not tap, the tantalizing bits of data she reports could have been transformed into valuable historical insights.

Smith contents herself instead with frequent lamentation that the history of the women and men who created Hollins Community has been silenced. Her oral interviews, photographs, and other primary source material lie inert in this study, unanalyzed, uncriticized, unverified. Her secondary research is weak, to judge from her brief, idiosyncratic bibliography. We are reminded once again that raw data does not constitute history, it only constitutes raw data. History emerges only as the historian assesses and interprets. We have here lamentation rather than assessment or interpretation.

In her effort to find the history of the Hollins Community, Smith spends nearly as much time on Cocke as on particular individuals in the Hollins Community. She claims that Cocke promoted literacy among his slaves, an unusual though not unprecedented act in the post-Nat Turner South. Her sources for the claim would have been handled far more skeptically by an historian, but Smith is not given to skepticism; skill and training in creative writing does not translate unproblematically into skilled historical analysis. Beyond the possibility, at best, that Cocke contributed to literacy in the Hollins Community, the reason for the emphasis accorded him is never clear. Sadly, much of the remainder of the book suggests the severe limitations of literacy if, indeed, he achieved much success in his campaign.

In fairness to Smith, she only half-heartedly makes claims to historical understanding. She closes by offering “this book to the Hollins Community as a joyful celebration and as a ‘healing art form’ to unsilence its rich and layered history” (p. 131). Yet those ends would have been served far more powerfully by a true “unsilencing” and “unlayering.” The text is filled with undigested poems, including one on the freeing of Nelson Mandela, tedious verbatim interviews more celebratory of the present than the past, numerous photographs with no analysis, nine pages devoted to reproducing repetitive, pro-forma letters between white men in the 1920s seeking a Confederate pension for a black worker at Hollins, among much else that adds little to our understanding or to the voices of the inarticulate past.

Ultimately, though, our quarrel should not be with Smith. Her “Pure passion for the project,” however she defined it, is sufficient. There is a place for celebrating communities quite apart from serious scholarship. Our quarrel must be with the University of Missouri Press. We have come to expect rigorous editorial oversight, peer review, and sound scholarship on issues of greater than local interest from university presses. This press has done scholarship a disservice, publishing a quirky, curious work of “passion” as though it were scholarly history. And it did that badly – the photographs are muddy, the proof-reading shoddy. Had this volume come from a small commercial press, destined for local history rooms in public libraries and the parlors of homes in the Hollins Community, scholars interested in contingent issues would have found it. The products of university presses, on the other hand, must be aimed at a broader intellectual audience, shedding real light, at one level or another, on larger issues. Diligent scholars will wring what they can from this volume; the shelves of most libraries need not have been burdened by it. The imprimatur of the University of Missouri Press will guarantee that many will be.

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