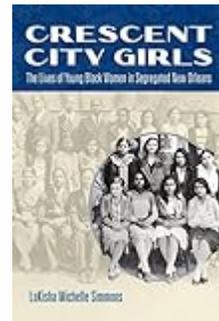


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**LaKisha Michelle Simmons.** *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. xiii + 266 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-2280-4.



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What was it like to grow up black and female during Jim Crow? This is the central question that LaKisha Michelle Simmons asks in *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*. She argues that black girls in New Orleans lived within a double bind: the oppressiveness of segregation and racialized violence on one hand, and the constraints of African American middle-class notions of respectability on the other. Each chapter of *Crescent City Girls* explores the different ways in which black girls in New Orleans navigated life and shaped their subjectivities within the double bind.

Given that African American girls were marginalized by their race, gender, and age, capturing their inner worlds might seem impossible. Uncovering the lives of black girls in the archive is no easy task, but Simmons proves that it is not insurmountable. She writes, "In the archives I became a miner, looking for any usable and even seemingly unusable scrap" (p. 10). Simmons conducted research at every archive in New Orleans as well as archives in other areas of the country with collections related to the city. Her sources include oral histories, social workers' reports, newspapers, photography, police reports, and girls' personal writings. Employing the tools of cultural geography, the history of sexuality, and affect studies, she offers a fresh take on interpreting

sources that scholars may have otherwise tossed. Simmons demonstrates how black girls came to understand themselves and their place in the segregated South.

While *Crescent City Girls* is a history of black girlhood, it is also a history of New Orleans. The city's strict division between "white" and "colored" did not accurately reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the city. New Orleans was home to native-born whites, foreign-born whites, and Jews. Segregation also blurred diversity among native-born blacks, who identified as either American black or black Creole. This division among blacks permeated their neighborhoods and institutions. Simmons shows not only how segregation shaped black girls' subjectivities, but also how the identity of black Creole or American black impacted how they saw themselves and how they saw others.

The first two chapters focus on space and its relationship to black girls' subjectivities and negotiations of the double bind. Simmons uses the analytical tools of cultural geography to interpret oral histories, maps, buildings, and photographs. She argues that space and the physical location of buildings reveal how black girls defined their relationship to power in New Orleans. In the oral history interviews, girls constantly referenced place

and neighborhood, and attributed certain characteristics to those spaces. In chapter 1, Simmons shows how space shaped racial and gender subjectivities in the city. She argues that African American girls in New Orleans created mental maps based on spaces where they were included and spaces where they were excluded. These mental maps helped them understand themselves and their place in their racialized city. As they navigated segregated New Orleans they learned about the interrelatedness of color, gender, and power. Black girls's sense of self, place, and power were constantly in flux based on their physical position in the city at a given time. The discussion of space that occurs in the first chapter continues in the second. Simmons focuses on two specific streets in New Orleans: Canal Street and Rampart Street. She shows how experiences with street harassment and insult contributed to how girls learned racial difference, sexuality, and the meaning of being a black woman in a Jim Crow city. While chapter 1 shows how physical space shaped girls's mental maps, an exploration of street harassment and insults allows us to also see the sonic aspect of space. There were certain areas where girls encountered insults from white men and women as well as black men. All of these contributed to their mental maps. Insults could be sexual in nature, but they could also be racialized. Insults could attack sexual respectability as well as their dignity and femininity. Simmons admits that insults are difficult for historians to capture in the archive, but are important to examine. A discussion of street harassment offers a glimpse into the racial-sexual domination of space (p. 58). Girls's conceptions of their sexuality were constantly in flux. In some areas, they could be seen as respectable and worthy of protection, while in other areas of the city, they were vulnerable to racial and sexual attacks.

Simmons's use of cultural geography provides a fresh perspective on the daily impact of segregation. An examination of segregation at the microlevel allows for a discussion of young peoples's everyday experiences that studies of larger systems such as state politics and the legal system cannot capture. Simmons argues that using cultural geography offers a new understanding of gendered violence. This methodological approach highlighted spaces that girls considered dangerous, where they frequently experienced sexual harassment, and where they went for safety. Simmons's work challenges scholars of the American South whose discussions of place during Jim Crow focus mostly on social performance.

Sexuality is the second analytical framework used in

the book. Scholars have begun to address the erasure of women in histories of racial violence through explorations of sexualized violence against black women.[1] However, there is still much that we do not know. Simmons builds upon the work that historians have done on sexual violence to think about the relationship between black women's sexuality and subjectivities. In *Crescent City Girls* she considers how black girls's understandings of and experiences with sexualized violence shaped their coming-of-age. This is particularly important in challenging the notion that racism in America was more detrimental to black boys than black girls. Sexuality is also tied into discussions of respectability. Gender historians have often used clubwomen's and religious leaders's writings, reform, etiquette manuals, and literature to discuss respectability discourses. Simmons analyzes how these discourses controlled young women, but also how girls interpreted and applied respectability in their daily lives and how respectability could also provide a sense of dignity and self-esteem.

Chapter 3 explores interracial sexual violence and the contradictions that black girls often faced when they endeavored to behave respectably while facing sexual violence. Simmons demonstrates this tense negotiation with the 1930 attempted rape and murder of Hattie McCray, a fourteen-year-old waitress, at the hands of Charles Guerand, a white off-duty police officer. Unlike the first two chapters of the book, oral histories do not figure prominently in the third chapter. Simmons is concerned about larger discourses of sexuality and sexual purity, particularly in the black press. Guerand was convicted and sentenced to death, garnering praise in both the white and black press. The black press emphasized McCray's respectability and sexual innocence. It also constantly referred to her defending that innocence. Here, black girls carried the burden of defending their respectability. In McCray's case, this meant that defending respectability could even lead to death. This is where Simmons's argument about the double bind becomes clear. Black girls who faced unwanted sexual contact could either be ruined by white men or risk imprisonment or death.

Employing affect as the third analytical framework, Simmons explores the subjectivities of black girls by centering on their emotional lives. Simmons asks: How did it *feel* to be a black girl living under white supremacy? How did it *feel* to be black when being black meant that you were a second-class citizen? In attempting to answer these questions she builds on W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness. While Du Bois's expli-

cation of double consciousness employs masculinist language, Simmons reframes it from black girls's perspectives. Chapter 4 delves into the emotional impact of the double bind and the trauma of Jim Crow. Simmons anchors the chapter with two interviews. One of the interviewees is Jeanne Manuel, a black Creole, and the other is Ellen Hill, an American black. Both were interviewed as part of the federal government-sponsored Negro Youth Study. The two girls, along with others interviewed for the study, frequently experienced nightmares of street harassment. Simmons contends that these nightmares were manifestations of the racialized and sexualized violence that black girls witnessed daily.

In this chapter Simmons also contends that sexuality, specifically chastity, was central to black girls's subjectivities. Although sociologists argued otherwise, she argues that for the girls themselves, being respectable or a "nice girl" was not inherent to a particular class. In many cases, girls considered themselves respectable if they abstained from sex, alcohol, physical confrontations, and spending time with boys alone. Acting respectably dignified them, which in turn, made them feel better about themselves. In this case, we see how respectability was not simply constraining, but offered girls a sense of self-respect that they were denied in the Jim Crow city.

Much of the book is focused on girls that would have been considered "nice," but chapter 5 centers on girls that were deemed to be at the margins of respectability. Here Simmons looks at delinquent girls who were sent to live at the House of the Good Shepard. Over half of the girls sent to the House of the Good Shepard were accused of inappropriate sexual behavior or promiscuity. The institution was shrouded in mystery, but Simmons gathered photographs, census data, court documents, and newspaper articles to piece together its story. This chapter demonstrates that even girls who transgressed traditional notions of respectability also had to contend with the double bind. One telling example is the story of sixteen-year-old Dorothy Jackson, who came from an abusive home. She ran away, and although there was no evidence of an inappropriate relationship, she was arrested for "relationships unbecoming of her age with the opposite sex" (p. 154). Upon entering the House of the Good Shepard, girls were branded as sexual deviants. This stigma shaped their identities. The story of Jackson and the House of the Good Shepard complicates the notion of "awayward" girls.

While *Crescent City Girls* broadens what we know about sexualized violence, Simmons also uses the his-

tory of sexuality to explore pleasure in black girls's lives. She draws from scholarly works on pleasure, love, and intimacy to highlight how black girls in New Orleans created spaces of pleasure, or pleasure cultures. This is perhaps one of the most important contributions of the book. Most studies of black women's sexuality in the era of Jim Crow neglect discussions of pleasure, making Simmons's work an important historical project.[2] She writes, "Without making an effort to recover pleasure, black girls's lives are narrated only by the trauma of Jim Crow. To consider black girls as full human beings, we need to understand their pleasures just as much as their pains—even if, for some, pleasure was fleeting" (p. 176). She explores these pleasure cultures in chapter 6. Although this chapter has a different feel from the rest of the book, it does not detract from the power or arc of the narrative. Simmons analyzes the reading and writing culture of romance stories, dance culture at the black Claiborne Avenue YWCA, and the pleasure cultures of Mardi Gras. She contends that black girls carved out these spaces of pleasure, or worlds of make-believe, as a way to "forge moments of intimacy" out of the shadow of Jim Crow violence (p. 23). Simmons's analyses of girls's personal writings, reading materials, and photographs is fascinating.

The literature on American girls and girlhood has blossomed in the past twenty years and continues to grow. However, African American girls remain marginal within this important historical project. To be sure, *Crescent City Girls* is not the first book to discuss black girlhood in the South, but it is unique in its singular focus on black girls. Other works that have focused on childhood and girlhood in the South have looked at black and white girls jointly. Previous texts have also focused on large regions of the South over large periods of time without distinguishing the rural from the urban.[3] Simmons argues that by zeroing in on one particular place, we can rethink traditional notions of space in southern cities. She writes, "The methodological focus on urban space" demonstrates how in southern cities, at Jim Crow's very center, there was a regulation of geography that relied on gendered and sexed notions of spatial power" (pp. 13-14). Joining scholars such as Marcia Chatelain, Simmons positions black girls's experiences front and center.[4]

*Crescent City Girls* is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, which makes it difficult to gauge change over time. However, Simmons's work raises questions and issues from which scholars of childhood or the American South can build. This book would be of interest to girls's studies scholars, and historians of

childhood, gender, and the American South. *Crescent City Girls* is a meticulously researched and well-written text that is a valuable contribution to the literature on the American South, histories of race and sex, and the burgeoning field of the history of black girlhood.

#### Notes

[1]. See Jacqueline Dowd-Hall, "The Mind That Burns in Each Body: Women, Rape and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow and Christine Stansell (New York: Monthly Press Review, 1983), 328-49; Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance; A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Random House, 2010).

[2]. For a discussion on the need for black women's

historians to think about pleasure and black women's sexuality see Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2-3 (1994): 126-145; and Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohante (New York: Routledge, 1997), 170-182.

[3]. For examples see Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Susan K. Cahn, *Southern Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[4]. Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

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