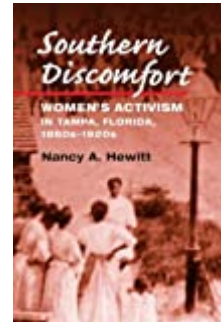


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy A. Hewitt. *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. ix + 345 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02682-9; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07191-1.



Reviewed by Alecia P. Long (Louisiana State Museum)

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The dust jacket of historian Nancy Hewitt's *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s* features a detail from "a photo of a worker celebration in Ybor City" in 1900. Ybor City was an enclave populated largely by Cuban and other Spanish-speaking immigrants who came to work in the cigar factories that were founded on the outskirts of Tampa in the mid-1880s. The fruits of their labor made the area economically important enough for the city to annex it in 1887. It is difficult to establish the race or ethnicity of the dark-skinned women from the photograph alone. In that way, the cover of *Southern Discomfort* hints at the complexity within this well-researched, insightful, and occasionally discomfiting study of women's activism in Tampa, Florida, in the years between 1880 and the beginning of the Great Depression.

Tampa's racial and ethnic complexity presents Hewitt with one of many analytical challenges. She addresses this issue by dividing her subjects into three categories, noting that "in practical terms, most Tampons made sense of the city's ethnic and racial variation by adopting a tri-racial schema that divided the city into African Americans, Anglos, and Latins" (p. 12). Her ensuing discussion of the city's racial and ethnic complexity, and the ways in which it "disrupted the biracial landscape created by Jim Crow legislation in the South," is as

thorough as most other aspects of the book (p. 4).

According to Hewitt, Tampa's racial and ethnic complexity is only one of the factors that accounts for the city's relative obscurity in the mainstream of Southern historiography. Writing this review from New Orleans, another supposedly exceptional corner of the South, I was particularly struck by Hewitt's insistence that Tampa, and other complex cities like it, must be recognized as Southern regardless of how this challenges established analytical categories. According to Hewitt, "Tampa's disruptions of fixed identities, biracial categories, regional boundaries, and gender ideals have converged to define the city and others like it—New Orleans, El Paso, Miami—as in, but not of the South. As historians, however, we need to recognize that this is the South, however uncomfortable the fit with dominant conceptualizations" (p. 15). Hewitt's introduction is full of pithy wisdom of this variety and merits close reading. Her introduction also provides an excellent compass for navigating her densely detailed reconstruction of an astounding number of activist women's lives.

While Hewitt does a commendable job of clearing an analytical path through the complex terrain Tampa presents, her main objective is to show "in concrete ways how women of diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds vied with one another, with city officials, em-

ployers, and co-workers and with men to claim public space, fashion political agendas, and construct activist identities” in the years between Reconstruction and the Great Depression (p. 9). Certainly these same activities took place in other locales and, not surprisingly, Hewitt’s endnotes place her study within the context of this burgeoning literature.

Hewitt also suggests that her analysis, “though unique in its particulars, addresses issues of critical importance to changing relations of class, race, ethnicity, and gender as the South and the United States entered the modern world” (p. 9). Although some readers might assume that Tampa’s complexity limits the book’s wider applicability, Hewitt argues that the city’s “eclectic, syncretic character allows it to speak to the concerns of women’s historians writ large” (p. 9). The author amply demonstrates this claim over the course of the book’s nine chapters, in ways that are often as challenging as they are encouraging.

The book is divided into two sections. The first four chapters fall under the heading “The Making of a Multiracial City, 1880-1901.” The final five chapters make up “Kaleidoscopic Connections, 1902-1929.” Throughout the book, Hewitt makes no bones about the difficulties Tampa’s women had in coming together across racial, ethnic, and class lines as they sought simultaneously to improve their city and their own positions within its multiple hierarchies. At least one aspect of the “discomfort” to which the title alludes comes with her conclusion that, for much of the period about which she writes, women allied with the men in their communities, and with people of their own class or ethnicity, rather than reaching across those lines to make common cause with other women. In speaking about the 1920s specifically, Hewitt notes that “most women activists, whatever their most salient concerns and identities, still shared goals and established coalitions with men of their own community more often than with women of another” (p. 249).

Though this observation comes near the end of the book, Hewitt demonstrates it time and again as she examines the labor activism and reform activities of women whose identities and interests changed in response to a dizzying number of factors. Jim Crow legislation, international politics, and diverse (and sometimes competing) attempts to improve living and working conditions all shifted the ground upon which women activists balanced their activities and loyalties.

In fact, Hewitt always writes with the awareness that each event or person she describes was multifaceted.

Her discussion of the events surrounding the Spanish-American War is characteristically circumspect. Although she concludes that the “fight for Cuba libre and the imposition of segregation fueled female activism and encouraged women to wield their influence on behalf of racial, ethnic, and national goals,” she also admits that, “in the long run, the Cuban War of Independence [was] transformed into the Spanish-American War, reinforcing U.S. imperialist designs and colonialist mentalities, which threatened to diminish public access for women and people of color” in Tampa and beyond (p. 69).

In short, Hewitt understands that the history of female activism can simultaneously dazzle with its many facets, challenge with its rich record of female accomplishment, and discourage with its revelation that the accomplishments of some groups of women held within them the seeds of oppression for others. This insight is not new of course, as anyone who has taught or taken a basic women’s studies course will recognize, but it is a persistent theme in Hewitt’s work.

The author’s detailed knowledge of Tampa’s immigrant, African-American, and working-class women is an extraordinary feat in and of itself. Combining information from existing secondary works with extensive newspaper and census research, Hewitt creates surprisingly complete and compelling sketches of many of these women. She adds to this accomplishment by comparing these lesser-known women with the city’s Anglo women reformers, whose activities were more thoroughly documented and thus easier to recover.

The author concludes that “there was no standpoint in Tampa that proved solid enough to hold women of any race or ethnic or class community in place for long,” and the history she presents is chock full of the starts and stops characteristic of a society riven by gender, racial, and class inequalities (p. 274). Given the diversity of her subjects, one of Hewitt’s achievements is making sense out of such a complex picture. Metaphors like “mosaic” and “kaleidoscope” help her bring some clarity to events and compare them to each other. Historical events sometimes pushed women together and other times tore them apart, as they sought to advance themselves and their causes through improvements based on race, class, identity, or ethnicity.

Southern Discomfort is not a simple progressive narrative—and therein lies its integrity and usefulness, both to historians of women and modern-day activists who strive to achieve gender equality in our diverse political and social landscape. Given Hewitt’s distinguished

record of scholarship, historians will need little convincing about the value of the book. *Southern Discomfort* could be used fruitfully in classrooms focused on subjects as diverse as the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, women's history, feminist theory, urban history, labor history, public history, and race and ethnicity. Local and state historians will also find much to inspire them in the way that Hewitt demonstrates the value of intensive local studies to historical and feminist scholarship. If you want to challenge your aspirations as a researcher, activist, feminist, or historian, *Southern Discomfort* is a must-read.

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