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Re-Writing and –Understanding Civil Rights History

In *Our Separate Ways* (2005), Christina Greene re-works the history of the American civil rights movement as a mechanism that was propelled not just by a few middle- and upper-class male icons (Martin Luther King, Jr., for example), but by an intricate matrix of low-income African American women who, until recently, have been overlooked as a substantial and altering force in race-relations history. By studying the modes and methods of poor and working-class black and white women in Durham, North Carolina, Greene revises the male-centred narrative of civil rights history to “suggest new ways of understanding protest, leadership, and racial politics” (5). This is a monograph that does not just include women as a support network for a male-focused narrative of accomplishments, but examines women in their own right as an integral part of civil rights history. Greene tracks the civil rights era as a movement that spanned World War II to the 1970s and includes in her analysis the formation of post-WWII female-centred and female-participant organizations; the examination of non-traditional spaces of political activism; the role of women in civil rights grassroots campaigns, school desegregation, sit-ins, demonstrations, and boycotts; the organizing of poor whites and biracial coalitions; class tensions in Durham; and finally, Women-In-Action, the ‘neutral’ interracial alliance of the Durham civil rights movement. Greene’s work inspires new ways of understanding American race history and civil rights, and with the exception of a very few moments where she could complicate her arguments productively, Greene vigorously and convincingly reconstructs civil rights history as a narrative of female grassroots organization and action.

Particularly noteworthy, is Greene’s assessment of ‘non-traditional’ political spaces. She examines, for instance, the DeShazor Beauty School as a politicized space for “black freedom” advocacy (28). She recognizes beauty schools and ‘juke joints’ as areas not just of social leisure, but of political organization and “civil rights work” (30). Like Glenda Gilmore in her 1996 study, *Gender and Jim Crow*, Greene

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works to understand ‘leisure’ spaces as arenas of political interest and activism. She contributes to a recent body of scholarship that seeks to understand the political sphere as intersecting with private spheres of social interaction and leisure, but also to redefine the political sphere as, in part, the leisure (or private social) spaces themselves. In her 2000 book, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, Laura Edwards makes a similar argument, analysing the household as a politicized space for Southern women during the Civil War era. Just as Edwards understands the public/political and private/social Civil War era spheres to be ones that intersect, so Greene constructs her Durham civil rights study as one that incorporates leisure and home spaces as arenas for civil rights mobilization and female political solidarity (or at times, dissidence across class and race lines).

In her effort to complicate our view of civil rights history, Greene constructs a narrative of neighbourhood and grassroots achievement that has at its core the localized efforts of Durham organizations to effect change. *Our Separate Ways* turns on the many different, yet related, local narratives that Greene weaves together to create a Durham civil rights history. For example, she analyses the Edgemont School and Edgemont Clinic as case studies of interracial ‘cooperation’ (139-164). She is also careful to offer case studies of women-centred (in this particular case, white-women-centred) local organizations (or as she terms it, “neighborhood federations”) such as the ACT (142). By delving into these local/neighbourhood case studies, Greene offers effective and persuasive evidence to re-centre our attention around lower-income, local women as activists in the civil rights movement.

Because Greene organizes her monograph as a series of interweaving case-study narratives, her text is both convincing and gripping. It is at once a monograph of Durham and an anthology of neighbourhood activism. Greene supports her quest to re-frame civil rights history as not just male-driven, but female driven (and not just middle- to upper-class-inspired, but working and lower-class-motivated) with local narratives of personal and neighbourhood accomplishments. Her treatment, for example, of C.P. Ellis (former Klansman) and “black activist” (160) Ann Atwater is especially provocative. Greene examines this surprising relationship as a facet of interracial cooperation, as well as the politicization of social/friendship spheres. While she could have developed her argument a little more thoroughly—perhaps complicate it by analysing the ambivalent rhetoric of females in C.P. Ellis’ assertion that, “I tell ya, that gal and I worked together good. I begin to love the girl, really (italics mine)” (162), as well as offering a statement or two from Ann Atwater (whose voice is conspicuously absent in this narrative)—Greene writes a compelling monograph whose localized narratives of female accomplishments intertwine to overturn traditional notions of a male-centred civil rights movement.

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