

Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb**Betty Livingston Adams****New York, NY: NYU Press, 2016****246 pages****\$55.00 (cloth)****ISBN 13: 9780814745465****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i2.144>**

Black Women's Christian Activism by Betty Livingston Adams, an independent scholar, and previously Associate Fellow at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, is a ground breaking historical monograph focused on the religious and social history of black women in New Jersey, and the nation, from 1898 to 1945. This is the first scholarly study published on the history of black women in New Jersey. For this, the author should be commended. Containing an "Introduction," six concise chapters, and a "Conclusion," the text is written with economy and clarity in under two-hundred pages. This narrative focuses primarily on the community of Summit New Jersey and the lives of two "working women," Violet Johnson, a domestic worker; and Florence Spearing Randolph, a dressmaker and minister in the A.M.E. Zion Church. Summit is utilized by the author as a nexus to discuss the role of black women in social reform at the intersection of race, class, gender, religion, and space as coupled with a discussion of how these women played a role in the processes of suburbanization. In their efforts made to gain equity within and beyond the confines of their religious affiliations, women such as Johnson and Randolph helped to lay the foundation of the early black freedom struggle in the North while forging alliances that were international, interracial, and intergender. Adams understands religion and the suburbs as "discursive sites for the negotiation of meaning and power" (p. 1) in this history of black women's social activism in the early twentieth century. She supports her analysis with primary source material drawn from newspapers, interviews, organizational papers, speeches, essays, and

sermons, as coupled with unpublished manuscripts, and a variety of secondary texts revealed in her comprehensive bibliography.

Adams explains the core argument and themes of the text in her “Introduction” by declaring that black women, “advocated a *politics of civic righteousness*” and sought to reform “civic institutions by placing morality and justice in the realm of public policy, laws, and institutions” (p. 1, 3) demonstrated by “organizing missionary societies and unions to extend the work of the church in society” (p. 1, 3). This study is an important analysis of black women progressives and it stands alongside other studies of black women reformers associated with the A.M.E. Church, Baptist Church, and YWCA movement.¹ Black women, as a part of the larger progressive ethos among Christian reformers, were influenced by the social gospel—a movement that sought to apply Christian ethics to social problems ultimately with the goal to transform the society as demonstrated in this work. These black women were northern Christian progressives responding to the changes in black life wrought by industrialization, mass scale immigration, the rise of the corporation, and suburbanization.²

¹ See also for more work on black women and Christian Reform: *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham on black women’s activism in the Baptist Church; *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) by Judith Weisenfeld about black women’s activism in the YWCA; *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2002) by Jualynne Dodson concerning black women’s Christian activism in the A.M.E. Church; and *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* by Bettye Collier-Thomas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), which is a comprehensive survey of black women and religion.

² John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), xi-xiii. See also for important works that examine black women in the Progressive Era: *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2013) by Farah Jasmine Griffin; *Private Politics & Public Voices: Black Women’s Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007) by Nikki Brown; *Gender, Class, Race and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994) ed., Noralee Frankel, Nancy S. Dye; and *Afro American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989) by Cynthia Neverdon-Morton.

That black women were *progressives* in a Progressive era has long been noted by scholars of the American experience; but, this study by Adams further expands our knowledge of black women and progressivism in critical ways.³ New Jersey as a case study of black women's progressive activism, concentrating primarily in the Interwar era, has never been explored so extensively until this text. The exploration of black women as critical actors in the processes of suburbanization as challengers to the "slum clearing" in New Deal era Summit makes this text fundamental to the study of race and suburbanization.

The first three chapters of the text discuss Johnson's journey to the north, black women's activism in the nation, and Randolph's activism as a national figure in the suffrage movement. Chapter Three is entitled "Please Allow Me Space" and it details Johnson's migration from Wilmington, North Carolina to Brooklyn, New York where she found work with the Eggers family eventually moving with them to Summit, New Jersey. In Summit, Johnson was instrumental in forming the Christian Endeavor Society Bible Group of mostly working-class people interested in Christian fellowship. This group became the basis for a congregation of black worshippers as founded by Johnson through affiliation with the Mount Zion Baptist Church. Chapter Two "A Great Work for God and Humanity" discusses the social reform efforts of black women in New Jersey and the nation. There were community, state, and national associations created by black women within and outside of their denominational affiliations such as mission societies and auxiliary units. Black women also worked with white women in national associations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), developed to fight prohibition and support suffrage. The New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (NJSFCWC) was founded by Randolph in 1915 to work towards social reform and suffrage. Adams notes that black working

³ John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, xiii.

women made up a significant portion of the leadership in many of these associations. In the third chapter entitled “The Home Away from Home,” black women’s activism during World War I, the suffrage movement, and the application of civil righteousness are the core concerns. Johnson, Randolph, and a contingent of working class black women supported the war effort and “linked their missionary experience to the NACW and modern social science in a program of civic righteousness” by “fusing justice and morality into the public sphere” (p. 58). This is the point where black women’s organizations began to extend beyond denominations and “bridge from church work to political activism” as women acquired the vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (p. 58).

In the second part of the book, the final three chapters focus on the breakdown of interracial cooperation between black and white women after 1920, black women and electoral politics, and the consolidation of segregation as progressivism gave way to New Deal liberalism in the late 1930s. Chapter Four entitled “Unholy and Unchristian Attitude” covers the years 1920 to 1937 and the rise of increased discrimination and racial tension in the emergent suburbs. There were disagreements between black women and white women over issues related to discrimination in housing, employment, and education during these years according to Adams. In the following chapter, black women make concerted efforts to use the vote and legislative redress by creating clubs at the state and local level “using the ballot as a sacred instrument” acting as “agents of moral redemption” (p. 105). The final chapter details the public debates about health and housing led to an “assault on black women’s bodies” (p. 132) through antivenereal disease campaigns and compulsory examinations. Adams demonstrates how black women responded through their sermons by providing advice about health education and continued community organizing around

social justice issues. Their community organizing efforts continued to combat segregation and discrimination in northern suburbs through the New Deal era.

Black Women's Christian Activism is an excellent work of historical scholarship with few limitations. Adams gives us a detailed portrait of black women's Christian activism in New Jersey and this has not been done before. She traces the historical foundations of the transition from Christian activism to civil rights activism in a *northern state*. The study of African American history in the Garden State, in terms of scholarly monographs that focus on black women in the twentieth century, were non-existent before this work was published. That said, the focus on black women might be expanded to include a discussion of women such as Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Marion Thompson Wright, and Sara Spencer Washington and their interactions with working women across the state. Hedgeman, a national figure, was active in the state and region through much of the early black freedom struggle. Washington was a member of several of the same associations that Johnson and Randolph worked within though she was a wealthy business elite in the southern part of the state at the time. Wright, an academic from Montclair, New Jersey also played a pivotal role in the development of the early black freedom struggle in the Garden State.

Lastly, the positioning of Randolph as a working woman counters the description of Randolph provided by her biographer Bettye Collier-Thomas who describes Randolph as hailing from a "prosperous" family.⁴ Randolph was well educated and had a profession as a dressmaker and a minister. She completed coursework at the Moody Bible School in Chicago in 1925; and in 1926, she took an advanced course at Drew Seminary according to Collier-Thomas.⁵ Though

⁴ Bettye Collier-Thomas, "Minister and Feminist Reformer: The Life of Florence Spearling Randolph," in *This Far By Faith: Readings in African American Women's Religious Biography*, Judith Weisenfeld, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996), 177-178.

⁵ Ibid.

Adams does note that Randolph was an ordained minister, Randolph, because of her educational and professional status (she likely made a reasonable income from dressmaking), may not have defined herself as a “working woman.” The Spearing family saw themselves as elite⁶ and Randolph’s work as a “dressmaker and instructor of dressmaking” coupled with her position as a minister, with a significant level of education, may have had closer ties to elite circles as opposed to working women.⁷ This framing of Randolph perhaps should be more nuanced within the narrative and the larger framework of black class distinctions in the early twentieth century. *Black Women’s Christian Activism* despite very minor limitations is a superlative work of historical analysis.

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⁶ “Toni Ward on the Spearing-Steele Family History Part I,” Toni Ward a Spearing descendant was interviewed about her family and she describes her family as elite. See the video interview here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gFPZgDC198>

⁷ Bettye Collier-Thomas, “Minister and Feminist Reformer,” 178.