

BOOK REVIEW

A New Type of Womanhood: Discursive Politics and Social Change in Antebellum America. Natasha Kirsten Kraus. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008; xvi + 262 pages; ISBN 978-0-8223-4368-4; \$22.95US (paper).

In Black and White: An Interpretation of the South. Lily Hardy Hammond, Elna C. Green, eds. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008; lvii + 160 pages; ISBN 978-0-8203-3062-4; \$22.95US (paper).

The study of nineteenth and early twentieth century American women's activism has undergone drastic transformations in recent years. Depictions of a monolithic women's rights movement, composed of white, Northern, middle class women, committed to the single issue of universal suffrage, have been complicated. The following two books further complicate this narrative, the first by recovering the life of a white, Southern activist, and the second, by showing the interconnectedness between definitions of womanhood and economic rights, and their relationship to suffrage.

In Black and White details the story of the long forgotten, but remarkable, Lily Hardy Hammond (1859-1925). Editor Elna C. Green, a professor of history, acknowledges that information on Hammond is sparse, but manages to provide a brief biography of her life and career, taken from census records, minutes and reports from meetings, and Hammond's own writings. Hammond was born in the North to a former slave owner, and became the wife of a Southern Methodist preacher. Her unique experiences as a Northern daughter and Southern wife allowed her to forge a career for herself as an activist in the Southern women's movement. After joining local and regional religious based organizations, Hammond turned to work with secular organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the Congress for Interracial Cooperation (CIC). In addition, she lectured and wrote on important social issues of her time. Her writing would later center on "the race question," a topic addressed in her most important work, *In Black and White*, written in 1914, and included in this book, along with selections from four other publications.¹ Hammond wrote during a contentious time in Southern history, following its defeat in the Civil War, the failures of Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow. While readers, past and present, may not agree with all aspects of her writing (for example, her contention that slavery would have ended without the Civil War), her appeal lay in her humanitarian work, encouraging Southern women to embrace Christian ideals, engage in interracial activism and contribute to improving the lives of others.² *In Black and White* covers issues such as segregation, employment, education, housing, alcoholism, and the prison system, issues which had already taken hold in the North, but were not yet adopted as widespread concerns in the South.

Similar to the work on interracial cooperation done by historian Glenda Gilmore, this book is most useful for undergraduate students for two reasons. First, it will allow students to realize that beyond the mainstream accounts of white, Northern, middle class activists, other women did exist. The lives of these other women, who also made important contributions to women's rights, have gone virtually unnoticed. Second, Hammond's issues are ones that continue to resonate in American society today. One hundred years after her writing, interracial activism remains essential to bridging the divide that continues to exist between black and white, rich and poor and urban and rural.

A New Type of Womanhood moves beyond recovering history to present a more complex interpretation of the antebellum women's rights movement, focusing on economic, rather than political rights. Following the lead of historians Mary P. Ryan, Nancy Hewitt and Lori Ginzburg, Natasha Kirsten Kraus, a professor of sociology and women's studies, focuses on New York State as a hotbed of women's activism. Using archival sources such as legislative debates, pamphlets, speeches, petitions and newspaper reports, Kraus utilizes the concept of "true womanhood," and identifies it as an unstable concept within an unstable society characterized by the emergence of a capitalist, market economy. Kraus argues that during the antebellum period a variety of issues were brought forward by activists, including economic rights for married women. Obtaining these rights, however, was made difficult by the restrictive concept of womanhood, which stated that women, as the moral guardians of the family, should remain in the home, protected from the evils of the newly industrialized world. Activists, as a result, sought to alter meanings of womanhood by arguing that women needed protection in case of family tragedy and death. In order to best fulfill their duties as moral guardians and mothers, education and financial independence were necessary.³ The 1860 Earnings Act finally granted married women in New York a civil existence, giving them control over their earnings and property, the right to buy and sell, contract and sue and be sued.⁴ Women's rights activists were therefore not only engaged in a material struggle, but also a discursive one. While the Civil War halted further gains, this altered definition led to an increasingly public role for women in the postwar period, and eventually to women's political rights.

Perhaps Kraus's largest contribution to the field of women's studies is to propose a new framework within which to analyze social orders and movements. Kraus uses a "structural aporia" analysis to examine historically specific social meanings and institutions not as separate ideas and practices, but as fully interimplicated systems that constitute our social world.⁵ Kraus uses this approach to re-narrate the women's rights movement, while demonstrating in her final chapter that it can be applied to other tumultuous periods in history. While New York as a location of study for women's activism has been overdone, Kraus manages to present a refreshing approach to the movement. This thought-provoking book is well suited for advanced university students and scholars who are interested in understanding the interconnectedness between language and society, as well as the nineteenth century women's rights movement in all of its complexity. Kraus, like Green, shows that there was not just *one* movement, but rather a series of movements, composed of diverse individuals, devoted to many issues.

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Notes

¹ Lily Hardy Hammond and Elna C. Green, ed. *In Black and White: An Interpretation of the South*. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), viii

² Hammond and Green, 12

³ Natasha Kirsten Kraus. *A New Type of Womanhood: Discursive Politics and Social Change in Antebellum America*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), Kraus, 191

⁴ Kraus, 206

⁵ Kraus, 212