Book Reviews

(1971). Nelson’s focus ranges beyond the East Coast, and her research reveals the geographical breadth of the movement, taking us to Mound Bayou, Mississippi, Seattle, Washington, and Atlanta, Georgia. She shows that context is central to the ways women’s health care was provided and, in particular, the ways race influenced how white women and women of color negotiated interfaces of health and community.

The book starts by detailing community activists’ astute awareness that health entails more than just a visit to the doctor; they focused also on “food, jobs, and community empowerment” (p. 14). Nelson shows how women’s health advocates’ attention to community health served the needs of many, but benefited women by improving their quality of life. Yet, activists knew that “gender inequalities could not be transformed unless sexual and reproductive autonomy were also secured” (p. 57).

Access to abortion is a prominent theme throughout the book, but Nelson is very careful to discuss nuances before and after Roe v. Wade (1972). She includes women’s voices and reflections found in feedback forms to the Abortion Birth Control Referral Service originating from the University of Washington Young Women’s Christian Association. Nelson shows the range of feelings that women had toward their abortions and how their responses were complicated and defied simple categorization of pro-choice or pro-life. Later, Nelson also points out how abortion carried multiple meanings for women of color feminists, especially due to the legacy of forced sterilization. Women in African American and Latino/a communities sought broader control to choose when to have children and how many to have, without necessarily rallying around access to abortion like many of the predominantly white activist groups; for many, this tension was indicative of broader misunderstandings and slights, and was difficult to resolve to create cross-cultural alliances.

A result of the book’s detailed descriptions is a feeling of repetitiveness across the chapters; yet this also shows continuity across region and time. The stories Nelson presents are familiar to women’s history, the civil rights movement, and women of color feminism, but sewn together they tell a broader and connected story of the women’s health movement across the United States and its longevity through the 1980s and 1990s. The book points to the place of community health in light of the Affordable Care Act (2010) and how this activism will insist upon broadening access as well as expanding the definition of health care itself.

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Analytically sophisticated, historically informed, and original, Mobilizing New York is an amazing study of the historical linkages among grassroots movements and community activists around diverse communities, from the early 1960s through very close to the present. Informed by archival research and more than fifty oral history interviews, the narrative weaves analyses that shift between personal, institutional, and collective actions and meanings that were affected by and that shaped these movements in New York City. Tamar W. Carroll breaks through several historical stereotypes and assumptions about how social movements have taken shape in the city—the biggest one being that “the feminism movement” has been (only) a middle-class, white, college-educated women’s “thing,” concerned only with those activists’ sex/gender, class, and white (skin) privilege. Working-class and working-poor black and Puerto Rican women (many non–English speaking) were and continue to be key driving forces behind other struggles for social change, economic justice, and real, on-the-ground democracy and equity not only for themselves but also on behalf of their children, families, and husbands. With this historical intervention, she opens up a key question: What have “feminisms” been all about?

Carroll summarizes her study as “chronicling the efforts of women and men who participated in direct action and coalition...
building as community activists in New York City, crossing boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the process” (p. 20). She offers close analyses of how individual activists—black, white, Puerto Rican, Mexican (American), among others—led several key organizations. But the strength of these varied social grassroots movements came from the bottom, especially from women of color. She focuses on key organizations, starting with Mobilization for Youth (MFY), funded by the Kennedy administration and the Ford Foundation, still within the Cold War. First conceptualized as a top-down project aimed at youth of color in the Lower East Side, MFY was broadened by low-income mothers to aim at larger issues of poverty and lack of services for their families and neighborhoods, especially housing. MFY’s storefront offices reached out to poor residents of color, who were neglected in what was to become city-structured gentrification schemes (ones led by Donald Trump, for example) favoring the capitalist corporate white class at the cost of the poor and homeless, including whites.

Multiple movements coalesced across generations, and grassroots activists from earlier movements, utilizing their honed strategies, bridged new struggles that ranged over many issues: neighborhood movements, reproductive rights, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome, primarily through the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—ACT UP), Women’s Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM!), welfare rights, and civil rights, with, of course, a feminist genealogy running through all of them. Personal vignettes offer deep meaning to the large political struggles, as the transformations in the city were both institutional (“Manhattanization,” for example) and individual. We know the now-classic tenets of identity—race, class, gender, and sexuality—but Carroll pushes us convincingly to think more broadly about how neighborhood, immigration, religion, nationality, language, and motherhood, among other vectors of being, matter in the daily struggle to survive with dignity.

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Bonnie J. Dow provides a close reading of early news coverage of second-wave feminism, emphasizing how television framed the movement and alternately helped and hindered feminist aims. Dow makes a convincing case for 1970 as a pivotal year when the three major networks “pushed the movement to public prominence” by interpreting actions such as the Women’s Strike for Equality, the Ladies’ Home Journal sit-in, and equal rights amendment (ERA) advocacy (p. 2). However, she also analyzes accounts of the 1968 Miss America protest and ponders how patterns established in 1970 influenced later politics.

Dow challenges the idea that mainstream media were wholly antagonistic to feminism. She contends that 1970 news accounts “ranged from sympathetic to patronizing, from thoughtful to sensationalistic, and from even-handed to overtly dismissive,” and notes that even negative coverage boosted the movement’s visibility (p. 3). While many histories focus primarily on print journalism, Dow’s archival research on television news considers how visual and narrative conventions affected feminism’s public image. Many 1970 accounts were “event-centered” and “conflict-oriented” ones that emphasized the aberrant spectacle of women marching or yelling but did not explain their anger (p. 55). Radical feminists often appeared “wild-eyed and eccentric” in “extreme close-up” shots, while liberal feminists were legitimized through meeting and medium shots (p. 56). Reporters often interviewed antifeminists and housewives who disavowed the movement; as Dow reminds us, this strategy of pitting activists against everyday women was later deployed by antifeminists to defeat the ERA.

However, some reporters interpreted feminism through a more sympathetic, “equal opportunity frame” (p. 106); for example, NBC told stories of average women battling workplace discrimination to illuminate feminist grievances. Trailblazing female journalists sought to educate female audiences, even telling viewers how to obtain an abortion in one