



To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War

By Tera W. Hunter

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As the Civil War drew to a close, newly emancipated black women workers made their way to Atlanta--the economic hub of the newly emerging urban and industrial south--in order to build an independent and free life on the rubble of their enslaved past. In an original and dramatic work of scholarship, Tera Hunter traces their lives in the postbellum era and reveals the centrality of their labors to the African-American struggle for freedom and justice. Household laborers and washerwomen were constrained by their employers' domestic worlds but constructed their own world of work, play, negotiation, resistance, and community organization.

Hunter follows African-American working women from their newfound optimism and hope at the end of the Civil War to their struggles as free domestic laborers in the homes of their former masters. We witness their drive as they build neighborhoods and networks and their energy as they enjoy leisure hours in dance halls and clubs. We learn of their militance and the way they resisted efforts to keep them economically depressed and medically victimized. Finally, we understand the despair and defeat provoked by Jim Crow laws and segregation and how they spurred large numbers of black laboring women to migrate north.

Hunter weaves a rich and diverse tapestry of the culture and experience of black women workers in the post-Civil War south. Through anecdote and data, analysis and interpretation, she manages to penetrate African-American life and labor and to reveal the centrality of women at the inception--and at the heart--of the new south.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 might have signaled the end of slavery, but the beginning of freedom remained far out of sight for most of the four million enslaved African Americans living in the South. Even after the Civil War, when thousands of former slaves flocked to southern cities in search of work, they found the demands placed on them as wage-earners disturbingly similar to those they had faced as slaves: seven-day workweeks, endless labor, and poor treatment. In *To 'Joy My Freedom*, author Tera W. Hunter takes a close look at the lives of black women in the post-Civil War South and draws some interesting conclusions. Hunter's interest in the subject was initially sparked by her research of the washerwomen's strike of 1881. This labor protest by more than 3,000 Atlanta laundresses is symbolic, Hunter posits, of African American women's ability to build communities and practice effective, if rough-and-ready, political strategies outside the mainstream electoral system.

To 'Joy My Freedom is a fascinating look at the long-neglected story of black women in postwar southern culture. Hunter examines the strategies these women (98 percent of whom worked as domestic servants) used to cope with low wages and poor working conditions and their efforts to master the tools of advancement, including literacy. Hunter explores not only the political, but the cultural, too, offering an in-depth look at the distinctive music, dance, and theater that grew out of the black experience in the South.

From Library Journal

Hunter (history, Carnegie Mellon Univ.) examines the rich dimensions of the lives of ordinary black Southern women, who were mainly confined to household labor as maids, nannies, cooks, and washerwomen in urban centers from the postbellum era through the Great Migration during World War I. In Atlanta, these freedwomen "were committed to balancing the need to earn a living with needs for emotional sustenance, personal growth, and collective cultural experience." Hunter offers valuable explorations into the complexities of African American feminine laborers and the contextualization of their lives. She is to be applauded for providing scholars with easier access to source materials, particularly primary sources. An important contribution to suffragist activism, feminist scholarship, and African American studies. —Edward G. McCormack, Univ. of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast, Long Beach
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From Kirkus Reviews

Although the subtitle suggests a work of larger scope, this is a modest social history that focuses on black women in Atlanta from the 1860s through WW I. According to Hunter (History/Carnegie Mellon Univ.), black women in postCivil War Atlanta were primarily domestic servants—laundresses, cooks, nannies, and maids—while the more lucrative and prestigious blue-collar women's jobs were reserved for white women. These jobs were guarded jealously: In 1897, when 20 black women were hired to fold bags at the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, the 200 white women who worked in the folding department walked off the job in protest. Despite great difficulties, many black women were, Hunter notes, determined to see their families do better. One northern journalist noted this: "I visited the mill neighborhood of Atlanta to see how the poorer classes of white people lived. I found one very comfortable home occupied by a family of mill employees. They hired a Negro woman to cook for them, and while they sent their children to the mill to work, the cook sent her children to school!" In spite of the enormous odds, black women made some progress toward fairer working and living conditions. One way they did this was by organizing: In 1881, striking black laundresses even managed to coerce the small percentage of white laundresses to join them—an unusual display of

interracial cooperation. Black women cooks also made more of their paltry wages by "pan-toting," or taking home kitchen leftovers from their white employers, and laundresses would often borrow the clothing they washed for special occasions. Eventually, though, many black women found these and other measures too meager, and by 1920 hundreds of thousands had moved North in search of equality. A capsule look at the travails and triumphs of black women after emancipation, too narrow in focus to appeal to general readers. (15 photos, 2 maps, not seen) -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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