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Kali Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*

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1 This study by Kali Gross, Assistant Professor of History at Drexel University and Director of that institution's Africana Studies Program, explores the history of Black women and crime in post-Reconstruction Philadelphia, using that history as a window into the social and cultural politics of race. As Gross states in her introduction, she sees this work as part of a larger project that places Black women, and the experience of poor and working class African Americans more generally, at the center of scholarly research. Her stated purpose is also political: to provide a historical context for the explosion of the African American prison population in the contemporary US. Thus, from several different perspectives, Gross's study is as an attempt to provide a more complete and complex study of the African American experience, one that transcends the more traditional focus on Black activism or on «figures and events that…dispel myths of black inferiority»(6). This is an ambitious task and from the start it presents a double focus for the author: how to look at the less celebratory aspects of African American history – crime, violence and incarceration – while contextualizing them within the discriminatory and brutal context of race in that same history. As she says, her purpose is to use «black female crime – specifically criminal acts – as evocative texts for historical analysis» (6).

2 Philadelphia is good place to situate such a study. By 1900 Philadelphia was the third largest city in the US and it contained the largest population of free Blacks before the Civil War (slavery was ended in Pennsylvania in 1780, just after the American Revolution.) As an important northern port and industrial city with southern borders, Philadelphia shared many of the experiences of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction America – immigration, industrialization, poverty and Progressive social reform. It also figured as an important site in the history of the US prison system – known for its emphasis on solitary confinement. Because of its large African American population and important Black middle class, there is a significant historiography of the Black urban experience in that city beginning with the 1899 pioneering work of W. E. B. Dubois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Additionally, there is an extensive historiography of the social history of the city itself, including work done (and data collected) under the scholarly umbrella of the Philadelphia Social History Project.

3 Against this canvas of good social history, old and new, Gross, sets her history of Black female crime. The book begins with a chapter on the history of slavery and emancipation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Philadelphia as a way of setting the context for African American lives. Here, using a technique she employs throughout her work, she focuses on a specific case as a way of illuminating and humanizing the larger topic. The trial of Alice Clifton, a slave accused of murder in 1787, forms the centerpiece of this background chapter and helps to anticipate the thematic «interplay of race, gender, sexuality, and justice» (9) which remain her primary topics.

4 Subsequent chapters explore the following: the social and work experiences of Black women, with a particular focus on domestic work and prostitution (occupations that respectively led to specific kinds of crime – theft for domestic workers, felonious assault and sex crimes for those involved in the sex trade); the popular and institutional responses to Black women and their crimes (including a discussion of the term – «Colored Amazons» which serves as the book's title); and the place of race and gender in late nineteenth-century criminology. Finally, Gross's conclusion both summarizes some of her general points and reiterates her underlying argument about discriminatory treatment in and out of the justice system.

5 In addition to trial transcripts, this study is based on quantitative data, police and prison records (including warden's journals), press reports, photographs, and various sources of popular culture, including broadsides and newspapers. Gross's quantitative evidence is based primarily on the records of Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, the site of incarceration for most Black women. Because of this her sample is rather small – 158 women who represented only 1.1% of the prison population during those years. Most of these women had previously worked as servants or housekeepers, the mainstays of employment for people of color, most were Philadelphia natives, and most were under thirty years old. With some notable exceptions, most of these women were convicted of larceny or vice (prostitution, bigamy, rape, attempted rape, and sodomy).

6 In general, I found this an interesting study: the focus is an important one and the prison information in particular is fascinating. Less successful is Gross's attempt to build a complex argument based on her understanding and interpretation of the evidence – her attempt to round out the historical record and the silences of Black women's felt and experienced behavior by using «black female crime not simply as evidence of illegal behavior, but as texts possessing a palpable voice, one that effectively speaks of values, ambitions, and frustrations and also one that contains rare clues about black women's past experience of trauma» (6). For this ambitious task we need a more complex understanding of life within the Black community itself, as well as a more sophisticated analysis of the evidence at hand – especially the sources of popular culture which, she argues, were so essential in creating the essential trope of the «Colored Amazon».

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