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Defying Jim Crow: African American Community Development and the Struggle for Racial Equality in New Orleans, 1900-1960

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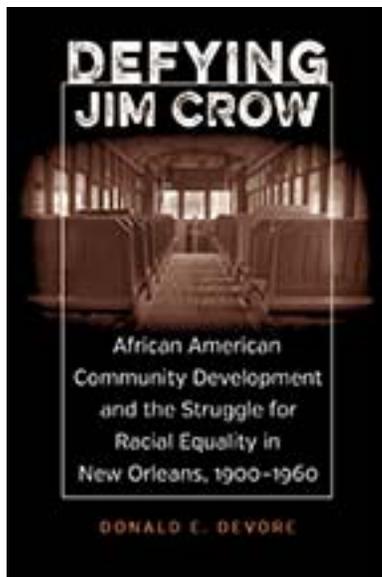
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highlight the cultural and political consequences of denominational choices.

Ultimately this festschrift succeeds in honoring Mathews as a beloved mentor and scholar of Southern religious history. His interest in combining regional culture with the history of a multitude of religious denominations is reflected in the variety of topics covered in the book. By examining how religion has been perceived and practiced in the American South and beyond, *Varieties of Southern Religious History: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Mathews* emerges as an insightful resource for those interested in not only the history of religion, but also in the cultural and political history of America.

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Defying Jim Crow: African American Community Development and the Struggle for Racial Equality in New Orleans, 1900-1960. Donald E. Devore. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8071-6037-4. \$45.00



In his study of the city of New Orleans during the Jim Crow era, historian Donald E. Devore documents the African American community's long fight for equality. Through an examination of the city's racial politics between the years 1900 and 1960, Devore reveals how black educators, churches, social organizations, and businesses laid the ground work for the Civil Rights victories of the 1950s and 1960s. Devore argues that to challenge economic and legal discrimination, the African American community had to be strategic and adaptive in their choice and development of ideologies, social networks, community institutions, and political leaders for their fight for racial equality.

How does a minority community sustain a culture of resistance in the face of government sanctioned segregation and outbursts of violence from the majority population? Devore argues that it was the African American experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction that served as a framework for the community's political activism. During the Reconstruction era, newly liberated and enfranchised slaves lent their support to a coalition of black Creole leaders and white radical republicans. With the eventual defeat of this electoral coalition and the ascendancy of the pro-segregationist Democratic Party in the late nineteenth century, the black community's shared memory of voting and office-holding would help to bolster their future organizing efforts.

At the start of the twentieth century, African American educators and activists in New Orleans concluded that black colleges were a critical element in the fight for equality and community building. These institutions were needed to train primary and secondary school teachers in the principles of self-help and community advancement. Drawing on the micro studies of several black colleges, Devore depicts the heroic efforts of educational leaders who faced down white interference and the threat of violence as they recruited students and faculty, broadened course offerings, built modern facilities, and secured financial support. These education leaders and teachers saw themselves as being responsible for growing an African American professional class as well as an informed and capable modern work force and citizenry.

According to Devore, the black church was one of the most important components of African American community building. Drawing on the example of church leader Robert Elijah Jones, Devore documented how the segregated Methodist Church actively sought out marginalized blacks and stressed self-improvement, community development, and black liberation. For many protestant churches, the push to create separate black congregations and leadership began in the nineteenth century. As a counter-point, Devore examined the black Catholic community's successful resistance to the segregation of services and the creation of all-black parishes. Devore notes that it was only in the second decade of the twentieth century that black Catholics accepted segregation, after calculating that having access to quality parochial education trumped the benefits of an integrated congregation. Despite the racial segregation of all churches in New Orleans, African Americans saw religious institutions as offering a powerful belief system and social space that countered the fundamental premise of Jim Crow.

Devore also discusses community building in relation to secular organizations that sought to advance the group's quest for social, economic, and political equality. Devore's detailed account includes case studies of service organizations, professional associations, local newspapers, civic organizations, and hospitals. Drawing on the experience of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) recruiting efforts in New Orleans, Devore reveals how local leaders struggled to grow membership and compete for the

community's attention and resources. At the same time, he finds that competing secular organizations were able to form temporary political alliances to challenge white domination.

In his study of the African American community's fight for quality public education, Devore offers the strongest evidence of how community development led to successful political resistance. He notes that various organizations and leaders refused to accept the mandate of white leaders to use education as a means of racial oppression. Operating within the framework of "separate but equal," the African American community pursued a decades-long fight to pressure school officials to provide them with black high schools, improve the conditions within schools, and gain an all-black teaching faculty. This fight drew together such organizations as the Colored Educational Alliance, the NAACP, and black civic organizations that collectively pressured the school board for improvements. Black business leaders also supported educational reform since it would improve the earning power of their customers and the technical skills of area workers.

Donald Devore's breathtaking study of African American resistance to Jim Crow in the city of New Orleans reveals a community's strategic and sustained campaign of individual improvement and community development. Black community members realized that to contest the discriminatory and violent political and social space of Jim

Crow, they needed to mobilize their leaders, social organizations, political capital, and economic resources so as to apply constant pressure to the existing white power structure in New Orleans. Devore's carefully researched case studies of community resistance introduces readers to a number of overlooked or forgotten champions of racial equality in New Orleans, and serves as a wonderful introduction to the time period.

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