

Critical article review -race, gender, labor in 1960's memphis



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Submitted Green, Laurie B. "Race, Gender, and Labor in 1960s Memphis: 'I Am a Man' and the Meaning of Freedom." *Journal of Urban History* 30. 3 (2004): 465-489. Print. The article, written by author and University of Texas assistant professor Laurie B. Green, explores the racial and gender undertones of a Memphis sanitation strike slogan in 1968 - "I Am a Man." Emerging from a history of enslavement, African-Americans learn that the civil rights movement didn't guarantee complete freedom (Green 466). The strike slogan which was about gendered issues of power and identity, therefore, carries the African-Americans "quest for the recognition of their humanity" (Green 466). Green, in this article, aims to show the black labor activists pursuit of freedom that encompassed constitutional, gender, and racial definitions. The article's strength lies in its exploration of black men's emasculation and their eventual "feminization" brought about by the labor and working conditions in the 1960s (Green 467). From the oral interviews, the author was able to elicit insightful responses about the gender, racial, and labor issues encountered by black men. By placing these responses side by side with a short narration of black slavery and the civil rights movement, the author clearly shows the underlying motivations of the black men who coined the slogan. The conclusion about black women appropriating the slogan for themselves, meanwhile, extends the article's significance in the areas of feminism and ethnicity. Not only does the article examine black men's opinions about the slogan, but the author also includes the perspective of women which, in turn, sheds light on the values women hold in feminist studies, and their sense of identity in ethnicity studies. For women, the slogan 'I Am a Man' means "justice" (Green 467), an assertion of courage (Green 474), or "freedom" (Green 475). Again, the author clearly

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establishes the different meanings attached by black women to the slogan through the oral interviews. The article's lack of structure, however, weakens the conclusion and disorients the reader. There are no headings that organize the article's main thesis and guide the reader to the introduction, literature review, findings, etc. The article flows continuously as a 25-page document without any breaks in between. In one paragraph, for instance, the author talks about the civil rights movement and then jumps into an interview of a black female in the next paragraph. Since there is no clear theoretical framework, methodology, and analysis, the conclusion advanced in the article rests on a shaky ground. The reader doesn't get to examine the theories used, review the research method, or verify the analytical interpretation. This lack of structure is somewhat surprising given that the article is published in a journal. Weaknesses aside, the author succeeds in threshing out the gender and racial connotations of the slogan " I Am a Man" which other scholars unknowingly miss. She develops different layers of meaning to the slogan, and then brings those meanings to the fore. This results to a deeper public understanding of African-Americans quest for identity and freedom. The article's conclusion, meanwhile, can be strengthened by creating a structure. Works Cited Green, Laurie B. " Race, Gender, and Labor in 1960s Memphis: ' I Am a Man' and the Meaning of Freedom." *Journal of Urban History* 30. 3 (2004): 465-489. Print.