

Jacqueline A. McLeod, “The Professionalization and Politicization of Black Women Lawyers and the Trajectory of their Practice: The Case of Jane Matilda Bolin”

Social historians and legal historians alike agree that the politics of race and gender have historically conspired to exclude black women lawyers from active practice as defined by the elite- and male-dominated legal profession. The narrative is replete with references to black women lawyers, who, in utter frustration, abandoned any hopes of meaningful practice within the legal profession, and pursued other careers in wholly unrelated fields. What is sorely missing in the scholarship, however, is an examination of how black women lawyers maneuvered this structural exclusion from conventional spaces of legal practice to construct professional identities that utilized their legal training, and at times wielded significant power. This paper explores the professionalization of black women lawyers and the trajectory of their practice in the early decades of the twentieth century. It examines how they created meaningful practice for themselves in arenas from local politics to social justice movements, and explores the extent to which these “social engineers” influenced governance. Utilizing an intersectional approach to the race, class, and gender realities of black women lawyers in early twentieth-century America, this paper also examines the professional life of Jane Matilda Bolin, the nation’s first African American woman judge, against the backdrop of the structural features of an exclusionary bar to explicate her professional trajectory. Through an analysis of the general and the specific, this paper will account for the role of local politics and the politicization of the black woman lawyer’s professional identity for a more nuanced understanding of the early practice of black women lawyers.

Gwen Jordan, “‘Courage, Persistence and Faith’: The Career of Edith Sampson, 1927-1978”

Only a handful of black women entered the legal profession in the half-century after the Civil War, and most of them were unable to maintain a law practice because of the intense racial and gender barriers they faced. This began to change in the 1920s at a time when broad support for racial justice (and women’s rights) had significantly diminished and African Americans were left to pursue the fight largely on their own. Scholars have generally omitted black women lawyers from this story, in part because of their small numbers and because they did not fit easily into the category of black male lawyers or black clubwomen. New scholarship on the long civil rights movement continues to broaden the known ensemble of activists and strategies employed in the fight for racial justice. This paper continues that work by focusing on the efforts of a small, but committed cadre of black women lawyers in Chicago and one of its leaders, Edith Sampson.

Sampson believed that it was essential for black women to become lawyers to lead the fight for justice, especially on behalf of those who stood at the intersection of race and sex discrimination. This paper will examine how Sampson employed this philosophy through her work in numerous local, national and international social justice and legal organizations, and in her remarkable career as a lawyer, a judge and an appointee to the General Assembly of the United Nations. This paper will argue that Sampson, and her sister lawyers, created their own paradigm of law practice, one that used their legal training to execute a multitude of tactics through a plethora of associations to seek racial justice, especially women of color.

Mary Ellen Curtin, “Outside Influences: The Making of Barbara Jordan”

This paper will examine the influence of northern legal communities upon the personal, professional, and political development of Barbara Jordan, the first black woman from the South elected to Congress. Jordan grew up in Houston and attended law school in Boston. In 1966 she became the first black woman elected to the Texas Senate, and in 1972 she went to Washington. However, Jordan did more than just break barriers. During the Watergate crisis, Jordan’s eloquent condemnation of Richard Nixon shifted public opinion toward impeachment. She became an outspoken advocate for voting rights and women’s rights. In the 1970s, Jordan emerged as a leading African American congresswoman and orator. Ill health forced her to retire from politics, but she came back to Texas and devoted her life to teaching and public service. She is buried next to Stephen Austin in the state cemetery. Her roots in Texas run deep.

This paper suggests, however, that in the early stages of Jordan’s career, legal communities in both Boston and Chicago played a pivotal, yet largely unknown, role in Jordan’s personal, professional, and political development. Edith Sampson, a black judge from Chicago, inspired Jordan to attend law school; and she gained her legal education in Boston. Before Jordan won her Senate seat, the black legal community of Chicago bestowed their recognition, invited her to give the keynote address at important functions, and lauded the militant themes of her speeches. Later, Jordan gained a reputation as a cautious politician, but her Chicago speeches reveal an angrier side to her politics. Jordan is always perceived as a product of Texas, but outside influences in her education, professional connections, and social life gave her the support and training she needed to break the barriers of segregation.

Sherie M. Randolph, “Florynce “Flo” Kennedy and the Struggle to Legalize Abortion”

Several decades after the political upheavals of the sixties very few people recognize the name of the Black feminist lawyer and activist Florynce “Flo” Kennedy (1916-2000). However, during the late 1960s and 1970s Kennedy was the most well-known Black feminist in the country. When reporting on the emergence of the women’s movement the news media covered her early membership in the National Organization for Women, her leadership of countless guerilla theatre protests and her work as a lawyer helping to repeal New York’s restrictive abortion laws through the *Abramowicz v. Lefkowitz* case.

Despite her significant contribution to legalizing abortion presently her activism both inside and outside the courtroom is marginalized and completely erased from most histories of “second wave” feminism. While scholars have accurately analyzed the centrality of the predominantly white feminist movement in leading the legal battles to repeal restrictive abortion laws, the centrality of Kennedy’s leadership in the courtroom has been completely ignored or vastly undervalued. Kennedy is a significant exemplar of the exclusion of key Black feminist organizers and lawyers from most feminist scholarship on the movement: the erasure of her critical role speaks to the ways in which feminist literature has failed to see black women as progenitors of contemporary feminism. Kennedy brought to the case her keen ability to place the state on trial and to mobilize activism outside of the courtroom. Kennedy saw the *Abramowicz* case as an extension of her previous legal work defending Black Power leaders against excessive government surveillance and control and thus the case became a stage for her to challenge state-sponsored oppression. She insisted that protests outside the courtroom be utilized to ensure that the courts could not easily dismiss the demands of the women’s movement. This paper demonstrates Kennedy’s centrality as a movement lawyer and underscores her ingenuity and success in using street theater both in and outside the courtroom to marshal public support and challenge state-sponsored oppression.