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**The Black Calhouns: From Civil War to Civil Rights with One African American Family** Gail Lumet Buckley

In *The Black Calhouns*, Gail Lumet Buckley—daughter of actress Lena Horne—delves deep into her family history, detailing the experiences of an extraordinary African-American family from Civil War to Civil Rights.

Beginning with her great-great grandfather Moses Calhoun, a house slave who used the rare advantage of his education to become a successful businessman in post-war Atlanta, Buckley follows her family's two branches: one that stayed in the South, and the other that settled in Brooklyn. Through the lens of her relatives' momentous lives, Buckley examines major events throughout American history. From Atlanta during Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, and then from World War II to the Civil Rights Movement, this ambitious, brilliant family witnessed and participated in the most crucial events of the 19th and 20th centuries. Combining personal and national history, *The Black Calhouns* is a unique and vibrant portrait of six generations during dynamic times of struggle and triumph.

## The Black Calhouns: From Civil War to Civil Rights with One African American Family Details

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## From Reader Review The Black Calhouns: From Civil War to Civil Rights with One African American Family for online ebook

### Nancy says

The Black Calhouns: From Civil War to Civil Rights with one African-American Family / Gail Lumet Buckley. I hungered for more details and analysis as I read this book by Lena Horne's daughter. Still, it was interesting to read about "the talented tenth," the middle and upper classes of generations of one black family. The book is largely about the successful members. Naturally, Lena Horne, by far the most prominent and prosperous, is the main character. I didn't mind reading it, but it was less "deeply personal and historically significant" than the front cover blurb claimed. It verged on being an atypical celebrity family story.

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### Imene says

The subject is fascinating but the author doesn't do it service. A lot of back and forth in the story, the timelines get all mixed up

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### Elaine says

This book could have used some better editing. Lots of repeated phrases and events from page to page and chapter to chapter.

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### JQAdams says

Gail Lumet Buckley isn't much of a writer, or perhaps she was merely failed by her editors: there are a lot of sentences here that seem like alien interpolations that were just sprinkled haphazardly around the text, having nothing to do with the sentences before and after. She also seemingly feels obliged to mention most of the biggest moments or themes in African-American history, regardless of how much they apply to the particular family she's discussing. But she's a decent raconteur, charmingly willing to say "I have no evidence whatsoever for this belief about one of my grandfather's cousins, but here's what I believe anyway." And this book, the history of her family, gives her a lot of material to work with. The history of one of the most prosperous African-American families from emancipation on is potentially very interesting, especially since the family early on split into Northern and Southern branches that allow Buckley to compare and contrast.

However, her choices of focus are not the bits I was most interested in. Buckley's mother was Lena Horne, and Horne's celebrity rather takes over the book. Even if I did believe the claim that Lena Horne "unavoidably becomes the star of the [Calhoun family] story," the attention paid to the supporting players and their subplots doesn't have to be nearly as perfunctory as it is here; many of the cousins basically get a four-line personality sketch from some doggerel verse one of them wrote as a very young woman, then a

couple of sentences about when they married and what their jobs were. Then they go away. I found that disappointing: sure, Buckley has most inside information about her mother, but Horne's the subject best-documented and easiest to learn about outside of this family history. Even when Buckley does hint at something interesting about her mother, she doesn't probe very deeply. For instance, there's one passing reference that Horne early on found being a woman more constraining than being African-American. After that startling turn from the book's otherwise dominant focus on racial identities, the comment is never explained or followed up on.

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### **Barbra Watkins says**

Biography by the daughter of Lena Horne of their family from after the Civil War to present day. While I found the writing to be dry and not my style, the subject matter was fascinating and very relevant to the racial unrest and inequality we still have today.

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### **Corelle says**

I had general knowledge other a accomplishments of Lena Horne. Then I re this book! Tenacity , knowledge and generosity runs well in the family , starting with the civil war! For example I learned that Lena's great grandfather (or uncle, I forgot) became the first African American licensed real estate broker for Atlanta, Georgia. The Calhouns/Horne's were a force to be reckoned with!

To keep my reading challenge exciting, I made a theme. For this month, it's Women History Month and my reading focus on books by female authors. This is the perfect book to read not just for this month. Lena broke a lot of barriers in show business and an activist for Civil Rights. So her life should be celebrated.

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### **Leigh Himes says**

Picked this up on a whim at Barnes & Noble and found it really interesting. Part history/part memoir.

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### **Kate says**

This is a very powerful book. Family history is an area I enjoy reading about. This is beautifully written with supported facts and show the racial divide that is still present in the United States of America. For me it was and is an eye opener as to how biased "we" are to all races, nationalities and religions. We need to come together to recognize we are of only one race - the human race- and treat each other with the respect and compassion we "ALL" deserve.

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### **Emma B says**

Interesting story on the paternal family of Lena Horne written by her daughter. A rich history of Atlanta and this family's place in it, as well as the ups and downs of Lena Horne's life. Story is flawed by including all

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the names of people Lena and the family encountered, good and bad. This slowed the story down.

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## Magill says

1) The author uses her family history as the framework for describing the development, lack of development, or downright regression, of the basic freedoms due to any human being (movement, jobs, voting, and life itself) for the 1st hundred years following the Civil War. And what was stolen, crushed, grudgingly permitted, or finally demanded, during that same time frame for and by African Americans (including but not limited to all other real Americans who respected and believed and acted in support).

2) The author uses the political and social events of post-Civil War society (and the battle for full acceptance as citizens, with the rights and responsibilities and protections, due to all Americans, and deliberately withheld from African Americans) as the specific framework for telling the story of her extended family and individual members over the 100 years following the Civil War.

And this is the challenge of the book: a not entirely successful integration of these two elements.

It is hard to put my finger on the exact problem as it is not with the scholarship of the history of post-civil war society. The book alternates between North and South in about 10-year increments from 1860 to 1960, civil war to civil rights as described). Within these chapters the author describes the people in the branches of the family living in the south and the north and their activities and engagement in the events around them, and the often very different impacts of being black in America in the north and south.

The first ~1/3 of the book did not engage me particularly (1860-1919) but the clarity and succinctness of the summary of political and social events, and people impacting the black communities and individuals during this time kept me reading. It was well-written, well-organized, and well-summarized. A good crash course.

In the same 1/3, the family information seemed a little distant, wooden, although the author tried to bring them to life. The careers, social position, marital choices and offspring were described but description was all there was. That being said, if they didn't have much to add to the narration, they did not distract from the historical information. It was simply was not engaging at that level, but I was okay with that.

The remainder of the book was much more personal as the author described her mother's life and, to some degree, her own. The north chapters became much more detailed, although the south chapters were weaker in that way, due to lack of significant family information beyond births, deaths and education. Much of the rest of the book, for the north chapters at least, was something of an abbreviated biography of Lena Horne, by her daughter, not in-depth but considerably more personal. This resulted in more personal perspectives of the political and social events occurring.

And this is where the structure didn't come together so well. The differences between the north and south chapters became more pronounced and the north chapters were more... diluted with the personal experiences as the author grew up. That does not mean they were bad - the author's observations and experiences and her awareness of how her experiences informed her personal journey and about her mother's experiences ARE interesting even though briefly and not deeply revealed. But they did distract from the more straight line of historical events.

I would note that one inexplicable decision with the book annoyed me significantly. There was a brief section of photos but in multiple places the author described other photos in detail that were not included in the book. This choice did not bring the people to life, it just pointed out that we didn't have a photo. I would

also note that the author's family were of the black middle-class with a strong emphasis on education and, in the north, political activity, and there were numerous mentions of well-respected and venerated leaders and educators and poets of the times, as well as people and events in her mother's career.

In spite of the weakness of structure I liked this book, although I have to say that this is a 3.5 overall for me. However, because of the historical information and context and because, too, of the warmth and pride of the author's voice in her family story, I am giving this a 4.

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## Sugarpuss says

I went to see Ms Buckley at the NYHS for a discussion of THE BLACK CALHOUNS (moderated by Jonathan Alter), so I was anxious to get my hands on a copy to read more. Man, was this book a disappointment. I know the author meant well, but the writing was all over the place, and the story was rambling and, in places, incoherent. It's a shame too, because it's a story worth telling and had the potential to be something truly exceptional.

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## Ari says

IQ "Later he [James Weldon Johnson] would say that 'the race problem in the United States has resolved itself into a question of saving black men's bodies and white men's souls' (111)

The structure of this book is somewhat a mess and that proved to be very distracting. The author provided too much commentary for my taste, one minute she'd be delving into great historical detail and the next she'd share her opinions on her family members or attempt to describe what they must have been feeling or try to make some connection to the 21st century. It's almost as if this would have been better served as a novel. The author makes astute observations but their placement in the book doesn't fit and it takes away from what would have otherwise been smooth historical reading. You can also tell she's very passionate about the military because she goes into extensive detail about military escapades, even ones not involving her family. Buckley also repeats the same stories quite a few times which is annoying since it's an issue that could have been easily avoided with some editing.

This is an amazing family saga and I'm glad it's being told, Lena Horne was not the only extraordinary member of this family. And it's great to read about upper middle class Black families succeeding throughout every generation after slavery. Through her family's history the author manages to convey a riveting history of America and I could not put the book down. Her family manages to be connected to several major figures in American history and all the major historical events which makes the book even more interesting. I found her explanation for why Atlanta became a hub for Black people especially helpful, she essentially says Atlanta's white people cared more about business than they did racism. Perhaps that's a well known treatise, but it was new to me.

I'm thrilled this is being made into a TV series, I really hope they do the book justice because it has the possibility to be epic from the casting to the costumes. This book really upholds the old adage "truth is better than fiction", I just wish the structure of the book had been better.

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## Richard Derus says

Rating: 3.5\* of five, rounded up

There is a television miniseries on its way via ABC Studios. Here's to hoping they do it justice.

My goddesses. There is so much I personally don't know about the African American history of my own country. The saga of the Calhouns is epic, and an instructive look at the roots of white nationalism in the demagoguery of politicians hoping to be elected to office. Vile, disappointing, unsurprising given today's terrors.

The author understandably focuses on her famous mother, Lena Horne, for specifics and anecdotes to enliven her historical thesis about the existence and condition of an African American elite in each decade following the American Civil War. That's inevitable, I suppose; had she done otherwise, assuming she possessed the information to do so, this book would've been as thick as a Bible and about as interesting. Gadzooks were there a lot of Calhouns and cousins and families and friends and husbands and...well, let's just say that a four-line summary of the huge majority of the dramatis personae still pumps us to over 300pp of relatively dry material.

It's the relatively dry part that bothers me the most. I am entirely sure that Author Buckley possesses the chops to do more with even cursory mentions than is done here. I am even more sure that fewer names and more anecdotes/reminiscences/stories would've made for a deliciously readable, dare I say it novelistic, book.

Not that there is a single thing \*wrong\* with this book. There's a slightly slippery slope in the alternating north/south chapter format; it starts to feel forced. Believe me when I tell you that this isn't anything more than a quibble. I don't at all want to give you the impression that the book isn't a terrific investment of your eyeblinks, especially my fellow white folks who are earnestly seeking some road signs in this complicated minefield that is race relations. It helps that Author Buckley has a background in history. Her potted course in American race relations is richer for it.

Don't miss this chance to learn about race-related issues in a relatively painless way, from the "other" side of the issue.

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## Sabrina says

A well done look into the history of an African American family whose two branches of lineage became famous ground breakers for every generation after the civil war with the middle and latter half of the book focusing on Lena Horne. Towards the end the back and forth of the North and South of the family got a bit tedious with going back and forth in time every few pages. The last few chapters of the book were a just a brush through the times from the 1970's to the 2010's with the highlights but still good. An interesting read into an interesting family and a good look at the past and how the nation was divided long after the civil war.

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## Gloria Piper says

Buckley not only traces her roots from the Civil War, but she also includes an encyclopedic history of the

civil rights movement, which began decades before the Civil War. Her great great grandfather started a middle class family dynasty that connected with many famous African Americans. The author herself is the daughter of Lena Horne.

One branch of the Calhouns remained in the South and somehow managed to flourish amid Jim Crow-imposed limitations. The other branch moved north and accomplished what would have been impossible at that time in the South. Poets, musicians, athletes, great teachers, social workers, doctors, ministers, politicians...found their origins in the Calhouns. Their accomplishments are awesome for their display of intelligence, lawfulness, industriousness, and compassion that poked holes in the color bar and uplifted every race, thereby uplifting America. It's a wonder that the bigoted could not find it within their hearts to take pride in the Calhouns and others like them.

While the listing of so many benefactors that enhanced the civil rights movement may risk tedious reading, for those who are familiar with so many of these heroic men and women, it sometimes brings forth tears. We have come a long way in uprooting the evilness that slavery caused over the following generations, but the march towards full equality for all is not finished.

This is an important book that lets us peer into the lives of so many who were affected by Jim Crowism. And it's only natural that Lena Horne's daughter devotes some chapters to her mother's life.

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