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Beyond the search for sisterhood: American women's history in the 1980s*

I

One of the principal projects of the contemporary feminist movement in the United States has been the development of a sense of community among women, rooted in their common oppression and expressed through a distinctive women's culture. This project is premised on the patriarchal assumptions accepted by the majority of North America's early feminist leaders: that gender is the primary source of oppression in society and is the model for all other forms of oppression.[1] American women's historians of the 1960s and 1970s not only accepted the premises and projects of the women's movement but also helped to establish them. The bonds that encircled past generations of women were initially perceived as restrictive, arising from female victimization at the hands of patriarchs in such institutions as medicine, education, the church, the state, and the family. Historians soon concluded, however, that oppression was a double-edged sword; the counterpart of subordination in or exclusion from male-dominated domains was inclusion in an all-female enclave. The concept of womanhood, it soon appeared, 'bound women together even as it bound them down'.[2] The formative works in American

[1] The classic statements include Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970); Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970); Brownmiller, *Against Our Will* (1975); Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970); and Firestone and Koedt (eds), *Notes from the Second Year* (1970). Only in the late 1970s did significant numbers of feminist scholars in the United States begin seriously to

consider socialist perspectives in their discussions of women's oppression; an integrated socialist-feminist analysis is distant and, moreover, is not a goal of a major portion of American feminist scholars. See, for example, Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution* (1981); and Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (1979).
[2] The quote and the clearest statement of its implications can be found in Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), 1. For examples of early historical studies of patriarchy and patriarchal institutions, see Banner and Hartman (eds), *Clio's Consciousness Raised* (1974); Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women's History* (1976); and the entire issue of *Feminist Studies*, III, 1/2 (Fall 1975).

women's history have focused on the formation of these separate sexual spheres, particularly among the emerging urban bourgeoisie in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reified in prescriptive literature, realized in daily life, and ritualized in female collectivities, this 'woman's sphere' came to be seen as the foundation of women's culture and community in antebellum America.[3]

Though feminists, including scholars, have perceived community as a source of support and solidarity for women, both history and politics affirm that a strong sense of community can also be a source of exclusion, prejudices, and prohibitions. For the past decade, the women's movement itself has been accused of forming its own exclusive community, characterized by élitism, ethnocentrism, and a disregard for diversity. At the same time, students of black and working-class women's lives have argued that the notion of a single women's community rooted in common oppression denies the social and material realities of caste and class in America.[4] Yet as the concept of community has become increasingly problematic for women's historians, it has also become increasingly paradigmatic. This article will evaluate the current paradigm in American women's history – premised on patriarchy and constructed around community – by comparing the creation, conditions and practices of communal life among black and white working-class women with that among the white bourgeoisie in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The community that has become the cornerstone of North American women's history was discovered within the Victorian middle class. There a 'rich female subculture' flourished 'in which women, relegated to domesticity, constructed powerful emotional and practical bonds with each other'.[5] Three distinct but related investigations converged to illuminate this enclave of sisterhood. Barbara Welter first identified the construction of a new ideology of gender in the years 1820 to 1860 that defined the 'true woman' as pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. Nancy Cott correlated this ideology with a separation of women and men into distinct spheres of activity, at least among New England's middling classes. For this group, commercial and industrial developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries simultaneously consigned married women to domesticity and launched men on public careers. Carroll Smith-

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[3] The antebellum period, roughly 1820 to 1860, has received the most attention from women's historians; specific concepts and frameworks derived from antebellum studies will be discussed on pp. 300–3 below.

[4] This position has been articulated most clearly with reference to race. See, for example, Dill, 'Race, class, and gender' (1983); Palmer, 'White women black women' (1983); Fisher, 'Guilt and shame in the women's movement' (1983). For a debate on the concept of women's culture by leading women's historians, see DuBois, Buhle, Kaplan, Lerner, and Smith-Rosenberg, 'Politics and culture in women's history'

(1980). While most black women are also working women or working-class women, the studies of black women in the United States have generally focused specifically on slavery or on cultural aspects of black life. Studies of working-class women, on the other hand, have almost always focused on white women. A recent exception is Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied* (1985).

[5] Sara Evans, 'Rethinking women's lives' (1983). Evans claimed this discovery was the most significant development in women's history and did so in the pages of the most popular socialist weekly in the United States.

Rosenberg then discovered within the private domain a dynamic 'world of love and ritual' in which a distinct set of values was elaborated into a richly textured women's culture.[6]

Though each of these authors regarded her work as speculative and carefully noted parameters of time, region, and class, the true woman/separate spheres/woman's culture triad became the most widely used framework for interpreting women's past in the United States. The articles and arguments presented by the architects of the paradigm are widely quoted, reprinted frequently, summarized in textbooks and popular histories, reproduced in curriculum packets, and elaborated upon in an array of scholarly studies. By gendering the Victorian landscape and evaluating historical patterns and processes in women's own terms, the historians of bourgeois womanhood have established concepts and categories that now shape the analysis of all groups of American women.[7]

Historians soon traced the bonds of womanhood into public arenas and across race and class barriers. According to Cott, the 'doctrine of woman's sphere opened to women (reserved for them) the avenues of domestic influence, religious morality, and child nurture. It articulated a social power based on their special female qualities.'[8] That social power was first revealed in church and charitable societies and in educational missions, then was gradually expanded into campaigns for moral reform, temperance, the abolition of slavery, and even women's rights.[9] By the late nineteenth century, domestic skills and social power would converge in 'social housekeeping', embracing and justifying women's participation in urban development, social welfare programs, social work, the settlement house movement, immigrant education, labor reform, and electoral politics.[10]

At the same time that middle-class wives reached across the domestic threshold, they also apparently, though more haltingly, stepped across the moat dividing them from women of other classes and races. Some plantation mistresses, for instance, decried, at least in their private diaries, the sexual double standard reflected in white men's abuse of slave women. In at least one southern town, free black and

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[6] Welter, 'The cult of true womanhood' (1966); Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*; and Smith-Rosenberg, 'The female world of love and ritual' (1975).

[7] These concepts, though supposedly linked to the economic and social developments of the early 1800s, have been projected back into analyses of colonial women and forward to twentieth-century studies. See, for example, Norton, *Liberty's Daughters* (1980); Kerber, 'Daughters of Columbia' (1974); Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women* (1979). Feminist anthropologists initially suggested that the division of men and women into public and private spheres might be even more timeless. See, Rosaldo, 'Woman, culture, and society' (1974).

[8] Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 200.

[9] The earliest suggestions of this position appear in Flexner, *A Century of Struggle* (1959); and Sinclair, *The Emancipation of the American Woman* (1965). More detailed studies based on the doctrine of woman's sphere can be found in Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity* (1981); Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex* (1978); Melder, *The Beginnings of Sisterhood* (1977); and Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the City* (1971).

[10] See, for example, Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (1959); Davis, *Spearheads for Reform* (1967); Seller, 'The education of the immigrant woman' (1982); Borden, *Women and Temperance* (1980); Buhle, *Women and American Socialism* (1981); and Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (1984).

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white women seemed to adopt a common set of values grounded in personalism: both races were 'more attuned to the needs and interests of other women, more concerned with economic security, more supportive of organized charity, and more serious about the spiritual life than men '.[11] White working-class women were also soon caught in the web of womanhood. One historian noted that this web could be paralyzing for an individual working woman, but added that 'when a strong enough wind is blowing, the whole web and all the women in it can be seen to move and this is a new kind of movement, a new source of power and connectedness '.[12] Those connections, moreover, stretched across economic strata as industrialization created 'an oppressive leisure life' for affluent women and 'an oppressive work life' for their laboring sisters, forging a 'bond of sisterhood' across classes.[13]

Elaborations on and extensions of female community multiplied rapidly. Women on wagon trains heading west, worshippers in evangelical revivals and in Quaker meeting houses, prostitutes on the Comstock Lode, mill workers in Lowell boarding houses, and immigrants on the streets of Lawrence and the stoops of Providence loved and nurtured one another, exchanged recipes, gossip, and herbal remedies, swapped food and clothing, shared childrearing and domestic chores, covered for each other at work, protected one another from abusive fathers, husbands, lovers, and bosses, and supported each other in birth and death.[14] For each group, these 'friendship and support networks' could also become 'crucibles in which collective acts of rebellion were formed'.[15] Middle-class 'rebels' formed single-sex public associations to ameliorate social ills and eradicate social evils. Quaker farm wives, in Seneca Falls, Waterloo, and Rochester, New York, attacked the 'repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman'.[16] Lowell mill operatives on strike for higher wages vowed that 'none will go back, unless they receive us all as one'.[17] In Lawrence, New York's Lower East Side, Cripple Creek, Colorado, and Tampa, Florida, immigrant women – as wives and wage-

[11] Quote from Lebsock, The Free Women of Petersburg (1984), xix. See also Scott, 'Women's perspective on the patriarchy' (1982); and, for an overstated example, see Clinton, The Plantation Mistress (1983).

[12] Tax, The Rising of the Women (1980), 7.

[13] Quote from the middle-class leaders of the Women's Trade Union League in Jacoby, 'The Women's Trade Union League and American feminism' (1971), 205, 206.

[14] Faragher and Stansell, 'Women and their families on the overland trail' (1979); Jeffrey, Review in Signs (1982); Cott, 'Young women in the second great awakening' 1975); Boylan, 'Evangelical womanhood in the nineteenth century' 1978), and 'Women in groups' (1984); Goldman, Gold Diggers and Silver Miners (1981); Dublin, 'Women, work and protest' (1971); Cameron, 'Women's culture

and working-class activism'(1983); and Smith, 'Our own kind' (1978). Similar patterns for England and France are traced in Ross, 'Survival Networks' (1983); Hufton, 'Women and the family economy' (1975); and Smith, Ladies of the Leisure Class (1981).

[15] Quote from Rapp, Ross, and Bridenthal, 'Examining family history' (1983), 244.

[16] Quote from Report of the Woman's Rights Convention, Held at Seneca Falls, NY (1848). See also, Smith-Rosenberg, 'Beauty, the beast and the militant woman' (1971); Melder, Beginnings of Sisterhood (1977); and Hewitt, Women's Activism and Social Change (1984).

[17] Quoted in Dublin, 'Women, work and protest', 52. See also, Cameron, 'Women's culture'; Tax, Rising of the Women, chs 8 and 9; and Jameson, 'Imperfect unions' (1971).

earners – united shop-floor struggle with neighborhood discontent and employed the resources of their everyday life as weapons in the class struggle.

How could the bonds of womanhood, first forged in the domestic enclaves of the Victorian bourgeoisie, have filtered through the walls dividing private and public domains, affluent and poor, native-born and immigrant, black and white? The answer provided by the authors of the woman's community construct was a combination of patriarchy and modernization. Patriarchy explained what women held in common – sexual vulnerability, domestic isolation, economic and educational deprivation, and political exclusion. Modernization served as the causal mechanism by which the ideology of separate spheres and the values of 'true womanhood' were dispersed throughout the society.[18] Employing modernization as the mechanism of change allowed North American scholars to recognize broad forces – industrialization, urbanization and class stratification – and collective psychological developments – the growth of individualism and the search for autonomy – while maintaining the primacy of gender.[19] In addition, the 'trickle down' method by which societies supposedly become modern suggested that the analysis of elite women could provide an appropriate framework for understanding and predicting the experiences of all women. Finally, the teleological bent of modernization obscures conflict and thereby reinforced the notion that bonds among women based on gender are stronger than barriers between women based on class or race.

The adoption of modernization by leading social, including women's, historians has carried us a great distance from Jesse Lemisch's early plea for a history written 'from the bottom up'.[20] As more feminist scholars pursued studies of black and white working-class life, however, they demanded renewed attention to the complexity of women's experience and recognition of the conflict that it engenders. At the same time, students of bourgeois women began debating woman's specific role in modernization: was she the repository of traditional values, the happy humanizer of modernity, a victim of male-dominated forces, or an eager agent of Progress? Those who compared the experiences of privileged and poor women in the Victorian era concluded that, if modernization occurred, it led not to the inclusion of women in a universal sisterhood but rather to the dichotomization of women along class lines into the pious and pure 'modern' woman and the prurient and parasitical 'pre-modern' woman.[21] Students of the Third World were even

[18] Among the most influential works using a modernization framework are Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*; Smith-Rosenberg, 'Beauty, the beast'; Degler, *At Odds* (1980); Kraditor (ed.), *Up From the Pedestal* (1968); and Smith, 'Family limitation' (1973). Cott is the most explicit in acknowledging her debt to historical modernization literature (*Bonds of Womanhood*, 3–5).

[19] For examples of historical modernization literature, see Brown, 'Modernization and the modern personality' (1972); and Weinstein and

Platt, *The Wish to be Free* (1969). For a statement of the general theory, see Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization* (1966); and Inkeles, 'Making men modern'. (1969).

[20] Lemisch, 'The American Revolution seen from the bottom up' (1967).

[21] This dichotomization has affected both European and American women. See, for example, Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good* (1979), ch. 2; and Davidoff, 'Class and gender in Victorian England' (1983).

more adamant that women, rather than gaining by the development of a new domesticated ideal, lost 'traditional forms of power and authority on the road to "emancipation" from premodern lifeways'.[22]

In addition, some women's historians attacked the concept of modernization itself as vague, untested, 'nebulous', 'both one-dimensional and elastic', or as 'a piece of post-capitalist ideology'.[23] This last criticism focused on the cornerstone of the current paradigm – the separation of spheres – suggesting that it may have been culturally prescribed by dominant sectors of society to divide classes against themselves. It is not clear, however, that either the working classes or the bourgeoisie itself actually patterned their lives according to such prescriptions. Certainly bourgeois women were not so separated from same-class men as to disengage them from the prejudices and power inherent in their class position. Evidence of this appears in white suffragists' use of racist rhetoric, Protestant charitable ladies' denial of aid to Catholics, affluent women's refusal to support working women's strikes, moral reformers' abhorrence of working-class sexual mores, and settlement house educators' denigration of immigrant culture.[24] Finally, students of black women's history reject the teleological design of modernization. Like contemporary black feminists, they argue that the concept of a woman's community derived from white women's experience distorts the reality of black lives and ignores the ways that white solidarity, including sisterhood, has served to deny rights to blacks, including women.[25]

II

We can most fully illuminate the value and limits of women's community by examining the bonds of womanhood among that group furthest removed from the Victorian parlor, Southern slaves. Slave women functioned within two communities in the antebellum era: one structured by white masters; the other by slaves

[22] Quote from Jackson, Review in *Signs* (1983), 304. See also, Sacks, *Sisters and Wives* (1979); and Benéria and Sens, 'Class and gender inequalities and women's role in economic development' (1982).

[23] See, for example, Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work* (1982), preface; Rapp, Ross and Bridenthal, 'Examining family history', 233; Freidman, 'Women's history and the revision of southern history' (1983); Lebsock, 'Free black women' (1983) and Pleck, 'Women's history' (1983).

[24] Among those questioning the degree of separation between men's and women's spheres in the middle class are Hewitt, *Women's Activism* (1984); Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981); May, 'Expanding the past' (1982); and Rothman 'Sex and self-control' (1982). On evidence of class prejudice

among women, see Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (1965), chs 6 and 7; Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, ch. 5; Jacoby, 'Women's Trade Union League' (1971), 218–21; and Gordon and DuBois, 'Seeking ecstasy on the battlefield' (1983).

[25] See, for example, Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (1981); Dill, 'Race, class and gender' (1983); Edwards, *Rape, Racism, and the White Women's Movement* (n.d.); Freidman, 'Women's history and the revision of southern history'; Harley and Terborg-Penn (eds), *The Afro-American Woman* (1978); Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* (1981); Hull, Scott, and Smith (eds), *But Some of Us are Brave* (1982); Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past* (1979), chs 5, 6, and 7; Palmer, 'White women/black women' (1983); and Simson, 'The Afro-American woman' (1983).

themselves. The key to women's roles in both was work. In the former, labor was imposed upon blacks as their principal obligation; in the latter, labor was a primary concern by necessity. In both arenas, women's work embraced the production of goods and services and the production of human beings.[26] In both worlds and in both forms of work, the sexual division of labor encouraged women to band together for sustenance, security, and sociability.

In the fields, the master's house, and the slave quarters, black women often performed sex-specific tasks and worked in sex-segregated groups. Plantation owners generally differentiated field work by gender – 'women hoed while men plowed' – though such lines were frequently ignored when the need arose.[27] Then, women carted manure, shovelled, cut trees, hauled lumber, drove teams and cleared land. Even when performing tasks similar to those of men, women did not always work side-by-side with slaves. The 'trash gang' was one form of an all-female work group. It was composed of pregnant and nursing mothers, young girls, and old women who were assigned the lighter work of raking stubble or pulling weeds while other female teams hoed and picked the cotton.[28] On rice plantations, the division of labor by gender was probably even more regularized and rigid.

Within the master's house, on all plantations, work was highly sex-segregated.[29] Female slaves cooked and sewed, nursed and reared children, and performed a wide array of domestic chores. Here, even more than in the fields, women worked in all-female circles in which the older trained the younger in work-related skills and survival techniques. The latter had a specific meaning for house slaves who were trapped by the division of sexual labor and by their proximity to white men in a highly charged and potentially abusive situation. The 'passionlessness' of 'true women' was counterposed, by white males, to the sexual insatiability of blacks, justifying the rape of female slaves and enhancing white profits if coercion led to conception. The testimony of ex-slaves suggests that they rarely found refuge in the sympathies of white mistresses, who were as likely to take out their frustrations on the victim as the victimizer, and thus slave women learned early the importance of self-reliance and of black sisterhood.[30]

[26] Throughout this article I will be employing Frederick Engels' definition of production which has a dual character; 'on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species'. Under this latter, I also include social reproduction which embraces childrearing and domestic labor as well as childbearing. Quoted in Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1972).

[27] Quote from White, 'Female slaves' (1983). I am indebted to White's analysis throughout the section on slave women. See

also, Davis, *Women, Race and Class*; Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (1972); Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972); and Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America* (1972), 7–72.

[28] White, 'Female slaves', 251–3.

[29] While black women were assigned to men's work in the fields, especially during busy seasons, black men were apparently never assigned to 'women's' work in the household even under dire circumstances.

[30] For slave testimony, see Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); and Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1868). Both are analyzed in Simson, 'Afro-American woman'. See also,

Once slaves were safely ensconced in their own quarters, they joined in the collective performance of essential labors, such as food preparation, household maintenance, and child care. Here as in the fields, women and men performed some overlapping tasks, but they often did so in sex-segregated circles. Other chores they specifically divided along gender lines: fishing and hunting were for men, gardening and cooking were for women. However, the value placed on men's and women's work was more equal among blacks than whites. Certain female skills, such as cooking, sewing, quilting, or healing, were highly regarded since knowledge in these areas was essential to the survival of the slave community. Midwives were of particular importance. Though male physicians were reshaping the birth process among affluent whites, childbirth remained an all-female ritual among blacks and one that occurred with much greater frequency and hazard.[31] Child-rearing was probably also more clearly defined as black rather than white women's work, especially since slave women often nursed and cared for the children of their owners as well as their own family. The emphasis on the slave mother's role was reinforced by both white masters and slaves themselves. As masters imposed a matrifocal structure on slave families, black women drew on their own self-identification with maternity to cement their central position in the slave family and community.[32]

Slave women, like their bourgeois counterparts, functioned in a sex-segregated world; but without access to land, cash, or the fruits of one's labor, slave women and men were denied the measures that defined status in bourgeois society. In general, the absence of such measures equalized men's and women's status and allowed women in particular to develop criteria for determining self-worth that were relatively independent of men, white or black.[33] Yet despite this development of a woman's sphere and a set of women's values, slave women did not define themselves in opposition to their male counterparts. Rather, black women forged bonds of sisterhood and then wielded them as weapons in the fight for black community survival. Moreover, though defined in part by women's roles in reproduction and domesticity, black womanhood was not an extension of white womanhood nor did sisterly feelings among slaves extend, except on rare occasions, to white mistresses.[34]

From the perspective of the slave experience, then, strong communal ties among women were rooted not in the culture-bound concept of the separation of spheres

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Lerner (ed.), *Black Women*, 47–51, 150–63; and Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg* (1984), introduction.

[31] On the transition to male physicians among affluent whites and the resulting effects on female rituals, see Scholten, '"On the importance of the obstetrick art"' (1977).

[32] On black motherhood, see White, 'Female slaves', 256–8; Cody, 'Naming, kinship, and estate dispersal' (1982); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; and Gutman, *The Black Family*. For a comparison of Southern white men's and women's roles in

childrearing, see Smith, 'Autonomy and affection' (1983). On contemporary black women's views of mothering, see Stack, *All Our Kin* (1974); and Black Women's Liberation Group, 'Statement on birth control' (1970).

[33] See, White, 'Female slaves', 256–8. On similar patterns in African cultures, see Sacks, *Sisters and Wives*.

[34] See, Simson, 'Afro-American woman', and Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg* (1984), 139–40.

but in the material realities of the sexual division of labor. That division assigned men and women to distinct but complementary roles. In this context, strong bonds among women strengthened the community as a whole, providing support for the interests of slave men and a defense against domination by white women and men. This same dynamic – of a sexual division of labor resulting in complementary roles, the development of bonds among women and the use of those bonds in defense of community interests, and the formation of a strong sense of identity among same-class women that served as a barrier to universal sisterhood – can be traced for other groups of nineteenth-century working women. In western mining and eastern mill towns at mid-century and in northern immigrant and southern industrial centers at the turn of the century, women banded together to perform essential labor and then wielded their collective power in defense of same-class men and in defiance of other-class women.[35]

In towns where the primary form of work was rigidly sex-typed, such as deep shaft mining or textile manufacturing, women and men formed distinct circles of association in the workplace as well as in the household and community. Yet even in industrial centers of the late nineteenth century, where both men and women worked for wages, sex-segregation within factories and the continued assignment of domestic chores to females assured the development of a sense of community based on gender. A variety of work-related experiences shaped the bonds of womanhood among wage earners. In Lowell, Massachusetts, for instance, young mill operatives taught each other skills, substituted for each other at work, warned each other of a foreman's approach, and shared meals, leisure hours, and even beds at company-owned boarding-houses. A half-century later in nearby Lawrence, immigrant daughters gathered at an appointed corner in the pre-dawn hours to 'walk each other to the mills' – talking all the way and sharing information on wages and working conditions in the different factories. On returning home in the evening, the bonds were tightened further. As one worker recounted: 'Back then you see this is how you lived – you slept in shifts, we all lived like one then. One kitchen we all used and we all knew each other.'[36]

Working-class housewives shared similar burdens across communities and across time. Combining their efforts and expertise in cooking, childcare, sewing, nursing, and laundry, housewives provided each other with advice, missing items for recipes, hand-me-down clothes, soap flakes, a moment's respite from child minding, and an extra pair of hands.[37] Communal spaces, such as stoops, streets, churches, groceries, and bath houses became forums for the exchange of 'gossip', including the latest information on wages, prices, and rents. These women were also in charge of providing emotional support, food, and general assistance during life crises, organizing social functions for children and adults, supplying welfare

[35] Throughout the rest of this article, same-class will be used to identify women and men of the same ethnicity and race as well as the same economic status.

[36] Quote from Cameron, 'Women's culture', 6. See also, Dublin, 'Women, work, and

protest'.

[37] See, for example, Cameron, 'Women's culture'; Jameson, 'Imperfect unions' (1971); Ross, 'Survival networks' (1983); and Smith, 'Our own kind' (1978).

services to widows and orphans, and socializing young girls into proper family, work, and courtship patterns.

The importance of these bonds of womanhood was strikingly visible when workers walked off their jobs; the ability of a community to survive without wages was often related to women wage earners' militancy and to the resources hoarded and distributed by non-wage earning housewives. Triumphs on the shop floor were directly tied to the tenaciousness of working-class women in keeping their families and neighborhoods fed and functioning. Evidence now abounds that striking women 'often outdid men in militancy'. It was 'harder to induce women to compromise'; they were 'more likely to hold out to the bitter end...to obtain exactly what they want'.[38] This militancy was strengthened when men joined women in unions and on picket lines.

It is true that skilled craftsmen and male union leaders sought to exclude women from their benefits and that women in the garment industry and elsewhere called strikes over the objections of male advisors. The most virulent sexism of union men, however, surfaced when the sexual division of labor appeared to be breaking down and in doing so threatened wage scales set by skilled men. In this situation it was often women of different racial or ethnic backgrounds who challenged existing male jobs; and skilled workers were hostile to any intrusions from these groups whether by women or men. When the sexual division of labor placed men and women in different industries or in different jobs in the same industry, thus eliminating the threat of job loss and wage cuts, men and women joined forces to protect their common economic interests.[39] In Massachusetts, for instance, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association and the New England Workingman's Association combined efforts to gain a ten-hour law for industry. In Troy and Cohoes, New York, iron molders and laundresses supported each other in alternating strikes. In western Pennsylvania, miners and textile operatives, often contributing to the same family income, received benefits from better contracts in either industry. In North Carolina, women finally overcame opposition of union leaders, joined the Textile Workers Union of America and the Tobacco Workers International Union, and played significant and militant roles in numerous strikes and labor actions.[40]

Moreover, both male and female workers benefited from the community networks woven by non-wage earning women that served as a safety net in times of economic crisis. In Cripple Creek, Colorado, for instance, where there were few wage-earning possibilities for women, miners' wives ran soup kitchens, boycotted anti-union merchants, walked picket lines, defended union offices against soldiers,

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[38] Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 160. For other examples see 247–8.
[39] For a brilliant analysis of the conflicts between male unionists and women workers, see Kessler-Harris, 'Where are the organized women workers?' (1975). See also, Cooper, 'From hand craft to mass production' (1981). For a discussion of male–female co-operation,

see, Brenner and Ramas, 'Rethinking women's Oppression' (1984), 44–9.
[40] See, for example, Dublin, 'Women, work and protest', 58–61; Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town* (1978), chs 3–5; Kessler-Harris, 'Where are the organized women workers?', 100 and n. 34; and Janiewski, 'Sisters under their skins' (1983).

printed union papers in lieu of jailed editors, raised bail bonds, and provided food for incarcerated members of the Western Federation of Miners. In 1912, the housewives of Lawrence extended their customary communal cooking efforts to provide meals for strikers' families, and older women shouldered more than their normal burden of childcare so younger women could join picket lines. Housewives also went door-to-door, and store-to-store, collecting food, clothing, and funds, using their power as consumers to pressure merchants into supporting strike activities. Standard household items became weapons against union foes with scalding water, red pepper, and household shears always at the ready. The 'gossip' networks of more peaceful periods and the communal spaces where women daily congregated became the communication centers for strike organization. The strategies developed there were often put into effect by the women themselves. They paraded through the neighborhoods jeering, hooting, and hissing at potential scabs; cornered strikebreakers and stripped them on the streets; and brandished sewing scissors to cut the backs of soldier's uniforms, thus 'exposing their yellow insides'.[41] In addition, in all striking communities, it was women, in individual familes and neighborhood circles, who stretched the available food, nursed the sick and wounded, exchanged essential items, and sustained the emotional as well as physical resources of strikers and their families.

The sisterly bonds that bolstered working-class communities, like those among slaves, extended from the domestic enclave into the public domain, were forged from material necessity, and were employed in the interests of men as well as women. The very tightness of the web thus formed often served as a wall against women of other social, economic, ethnic, or racial groups. In western mining camps, for instance, prostitutes and dance hall girls formed their own sisterly circles through the exchange of 'small favors, the sharing of meals, fashion advice, and sewing', yet miners' wives recognized no common bonds. Here the division of sexual labor between 'good' girls and 'bad' girls served to divide working-class women against themselves. Yet at the same time, miners' wives refused to support women of the merchant and professional families in their 'civic housekeeping' crusades against gambling houses and brothels since crusade leaders sided with employers and against workers whenever strikes occurred.[42]

Lowell mill operatives were less hostile to the town's 'ladies' who they believed would be 'compassionate' to any who were 'in want'; but they claimed none the less that 'we prefer to have the disposing of our charities in our own hands'.[43] While willing to dispense that charity to Yankee sisters and brothers, native-born mill operatives refused to extend it to the Irish and French-Canadian women who began flooding the mills at mid-century. An even more direct confrontation between communities of working women occurred in Atlanta in 1896. There it was the attempt to introduce black women into textile jobs that led to a strike and the

[41] Quote from Cameron, 'Women's culture', 10–11. See also, Jameson, 'Imperfect unions', especially 191–3.

[42] On prostitutes, quote is from Jeffrey, Review in *Signs* (1982), 146. On miners'

wives' responses, see Jameson, 'Imperfect unions', 180, 184–6, and 188–9.

[43] Quoted in Dublin, 'Women, work and protest' (1971), 53.

formation of a union by previously unorganized white women. The union's first victory was the ouster of the newly recruited black employees. In the tobacco towns of North Carolina, the lines between black and white communities were subtler but no less definitively drawn; and they were clearly rooted in the racial and sexual divisions of labor. Black women, who suffered from lower wages and more frequent lay offs than whites, were hired by white women co-workers as domestic servants during slack seasons.[44] This practice eased the tension between white working-class husbands and wives as the latter suffered under the double burden of wage work and house work while also reinforcing, both symbolically and pragmatically, the racial specificity of Southern sisterhood.

III

If we take these experiences of community among women and project them back upon the Victorian bourgeoisie, we find important parallels. The separation of spheres which supposedly arose from an ideological barrier between men's and women's worlds may be more usefully analyzed as a transformation in the sexual division of labor. Occurring in the midst of commercial and industrial development, the new division provided for more specialized roles for each sex and thereby assured their mutual dependency in the production of goods and services and the reproduction of human beings. Bourgeois women, rather than retreating into an isolated domestic enclave that was a haven from class concerns and conflicts, became central actors in the family and the community: in both arenas their labor was essential to class formation.[45] Still, they performed their tasks in sex-segregated groups; and a particular set of female rituals and values did emerge from these groups as it did among women in other economic, ethnic, and racial enclaves.

The sexual division of labor rigidified among the emerging bourgeoisie by the mid-nineteenth century as middle-class, and especially married, women retreated from the cash nexus and from the fecundity of their foremothers. Home-bound wives were not idle, however. They continued to produce children's and women's clothing and a variety of other goods, and they provided a wide range of services for their families – laundry, cleaning, food preparation, shopping, and child care. The assistance of domestic servants relieved privileged women of some of the most arduous physical labor, but the majority of middle-class women were confronted with ever-expanding duties as furniture became more elaborate, home entertain-ments more prevalent, and consumerism more pervasive.[46] Overall, the 'felicity

[44] Janiewski, 'Sisters under their skins', 26, 29–30.

[45] See, Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981), chs 4 and 5; and Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, ch. 7.

[46] On changes in domestic work and domestic servitude, see Strasser, *Never Done* (1982); and Dudden, *Serving Women*

(1983). In addition, women had less help from children with the expansion of public educa-tion. For an analysis of the variation in (or lack of) hours spent on housework as a result of technological changes, see Hartmann, 'The family as a locus of gender, class, and political struggle' (1981); and Vanek, 'Time spent in housework' (1974).

of families' was increasingly dependent on wives who were 'properly methodical and economical in their distributions and expenditures of time'.[47]

The greatest transformation for these women in the use of time was the shift in emphasis from the production of goods to the production of human beings. The declining birth rate affected bourgeois women in two ways. First, they assumed a greater role in policing sexual activity, their own and others, accepting in the process a new sexual identity of 'passionlessness'. Second, the nurturing and socialization of bourgeois children became more complex in this period and mothers shouldered most of the added burden.[48] From the first months of an infant's life, mothers were admonished to begin 'instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government', preparing them for service in a new array of white-collar and professional careers, and protecting sons and daughters from the 'contamination of the streets' and the corruption of their souls.[49] To educate mothers for their new role, advice books, magazines, and mothers' associations flourished: the price of successful progeny was eternal maternal vigilance.

The concern for the maintenance and upward mobility of the family was shared by husbands and wives even as their roles in that achievement were rendered more distinct. This was true in the public as well as the private sphere. It proved impossible to protect children from contaminants and corruption without active community involvement; and bourgeois mothers, with the approval of their husbands, banded together to fight delinquency, destitution, prostitution, profligacy, intemperance, and impiety. Such endeavors extended the sexual division of labor into the public arena where men preferred cash donations and financial and legal advice and women raised and distributed funds and supplied the voluntary labor to establish the first urban welfare systems.[50]

As in the working class, middle-class women were not a unified body in the mid-nineteenth century and, like them, the critical divisions were not along lines of gender but of economic and social interest. And again, these divisions were most visible in the public domain where conflicts among three distinct segments of the emerging bourgeoisie revealed that sibling rivalry was as characteristic as sisterhood. The conflicts, moreover, embraced both the goals and the styles of social activism. In Rochester, New York, for instance, the wives of the city's wealthiest and most powerful men labored 'economically, noiselessly, and consistently' to ameliorate the worst effects of rapid urban growth. At the other end of the middle-class spectrum, the wives of farmers and small traders, outside

[47] Judith Sargent Murray, a late eighteenth century educator, quoted in Kerber, 'Daughters of Liberty' (1974), 91.

[48] On the first effect, see Cott, 'Passionlessness' (1978); and Smith, 'Family limitation' (1973). On the second, see Kuhn, *The Mother's Role in Childhood Education* (1974); Folbre, 'Of patriarchy born' (1983); Minge-Kalman, 'The Industrial Revolution and the European family' (1978); and Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981), ch. 5.

[49] Quote from Dr Benjamin Rush in Kerber, 'Daughters of Columbia' (1974), 91; and Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 148.

[50] Numerous community studies, both published and in progress, make this point clearly. See particularly, Hewitt, *Women's Activism*; Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (1984); and Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*. Current research on Cinncinnati by Caroline Blum and on St Louis by Marion Hunt provide further evidence.

the circles of local political influence, asserted that 'commotion shows signs of vitality' and organized demonstrations, wore bloomers instead of long skirts, and socialized in mixed racial company in their attempt to foment a 'thorough Re-organization of Society'. In between these extremes, the wives of upwardly mobile entrepreneurs insisted that there was a proper role for women 'between the doll and the Amazon', apparently located in orphan asylums, homes for delinquent boys and 'friendless' women, temperance crusades, and female auxiliaries to men's political associations.[51] In each case, the women had the support of male kin and neighbors; and together, the men and women of each class segment sought to channel social change in the direction of their own material and social interests.[52]

It was those in between the Amazons and the dolls who most fully embraced the tenets of true womanhood, yet it was precisely these upwardly mobile, public-minded women who most often substituted class hegemony for sisterly harmony. The 'contradiction in the exercise of bourgeois women's historical agency' was most evident for this group: 'that women both wielded power and that their power was not always progressive'.[53] Indeed, the adherence of privileged women to a narrow and class-bound definition of women's proper sphere while a boon to their own sense of community was a barrier to their inclusion of women from other social and economic circumstances. Bourgeois women's new roles in production and reproduction were rooted in a 'decentralized home system' in which each married woman was wholly responsible for the care and nurture of her own individual family, 'passionlessness' combined with vigilant maternity, moral and spiritual superiority that justified women's power in the family and entry into the public domain, voluntary labor, and the belief in the natural and universal differentiation of the sexes in biological, intellectual, emotional, and economic terms.[54] When 'true women' attempted to extend these 'benefits' and beliefs to all women, they failed to recognize the value that white and black working-class women placed on their own carefully constructed communities and therefore created antipathy in their search for unity.

'True women', as educators, writers, dispensers of charity and missionaries to the heathen touted their own lifestyle, expressed and covered its contradictions in their public espousals of privatized domesticity, and took little cognizance of the values and mores of those being aided.[55] Even those female reformers who demonstrated genuine concern for the problems faced by women across classes did not necessarily offer solutions that were more attentive to cultural and social differences among women. In the desire to eliminate the sexual double standard,

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[51] Quoted in Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, 17, 189–90, and 209; see also 243–52 generally.

[52] See Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, ch. 7; and Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, ch. 3.

[53] Newton, Ryan, and Walkowitz (eds), *Sex and Class* (1983), editors' introduction, 9.

[54] On the development of the 'decentralized home system', see Hartmann, 'The family as

the locus of gender, class and political struggle' (1981).

[55] See, for example, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher* (1973); Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage* (1984); and Young, 'Women, civilization, and the Indian question' (1982).

for instance, middle-class moral reformers offered prostitutes the wages of domestic servants as a substitute for the wages of sin and sought to replace sexual pleasure with passionlessness in order to curb what they saw as the dangers of unbridled lust. Their marginal concern for fertility control became the primary focus of female activists by the late nineteenth century. In family planning campaigns, the economic burden of large numbers of children and the technical control of conception led women to advocate the small nuclear family as the model for all groups, without attention to different cultural and social meanings of motherhood. Similarly, affluent wives claimed solidarity with working-class sisters in the fight against alcohol, yet few temperance leaders helped working-class women organize on their own behalf or supported divorce as an option for abused wives. All three groups of bourgeois reformers advocated state regulation of the vices they abhorred, the use of charity to aid deserving victims, and the intervention of male physicians to apply scientific solutions to moral dilemmas. In each case, these solutions lessened working-class women's control over their own lives and instead increased the powers of the dominant class in shaping the most intimate aspects of working-class women's lives.[56]

In the attempt to free working women from the hazards of long hours and poor working conditions, middle-class women again rejected the strategy of supporting grassroots organizational efforts. Instead, they aligned themselves, sometimes inadvertently, with concerned politicians and chauvinistic union leaders in demanding protective legislation to reduce the hours and workload of female wage earners. Even those privileged women with more progressive views, who established working alliances with laboring sisters through such associations as the Women's Trade Union League, often supported an activist agenda that placed the priorities of the women's movement – suffrage – above the bread-and-butter issues crucial to the workers.[57] Also, most middle-class women genuinely believed that the 'family wage', by which the male head of household received a sufficient salary to support his wife and children, was the best hope for society and for working women. Yet, as upwardly mobile black and immigrant women discovered, when women's wages and their domestic labor became or were perceived as less essential to the family, the household became more clearly a den of inequity.[58]

[56] See Gordon and DuBois, 'Seeking ecstasy on the battlefield' (1983); Ryan, 'The power of women's networks' (1979); Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (1976); and Borden, *Women and Temperance* (1980). The outstanding example of moral reform studies, focused on England, is Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980). Early investigations into working-class and minority groups suggest that they construct their sexuality and morality differently from the bourgeoisie. See, for instance, Dannenbaum, 'The origins of temperance activism and militancy among American women' (1981); Duberman, Eggan and Clemmer, 'Documents in Hopi sexuality'

(1979); Peiss, '"Charity Girls" and city pleasures' (1983); and Simson, 'Afro-American woman'.

[57] See Kessler-Harris, 'Where are the organized women workers?' (1975); Jacoby, 'Women's Trade Union League'; and Dye, 'Creating a feminist alliance' (1971).

[58] Cameron has found evidence of immigrant women's opposition to the 'family wage' in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in the 1880s based on women's fear of losing power in the family. (Personal correspondence with the author.) On changes in status with upward mobility, see especially, Terborg-Penn, 'Black male perspectives on the nineteenth-

This domesticated den, however, was the centerpiece of most bourgeois reform efforts. Aid was offered to individual families who most closely resembled the privatized ideal. Thus, alms were distributed to 'respectable' families in impoverished neighborhoods. Birth control was dispensed to married women in stable relationships to remove the taint of promiscuity from family planning clinics. Poor women in urban and rural areas were forced to hide, limit, or relinquish their communal modes of child care and healing to gain access to public health programs, nursing services, and well-baby clinics. Americanization courses taught immigrant daughters to emulate bourgeois lifestyles and to evacuate the crowded stoops and communal kitchens for the privatized home.[59]

Finally, middle-class women, believing that they were essentially different from men, advocated the establishment of single-sex associations and thereby created divisions within those working-class communities which they had supposedly entered to assist.[60] They were aided, no doubt, by working-class men who alternately excluded women from their class-based organizations, attempted to gain control of potentially successful working-class women's campaigns, or ignored women's issues in pursuit of their own agenda. Thus, in the garment workers' strike of 1908, union leaders only offered support once the women had walked off the job. In the tenant's rights movement and the kosher meat boycotts in New York City, women 'pioneered as the organizers of protests', but men took over 'when the higher levels of the structure first emerged'.[61] In anti-lynching campaigns in the South, it was black women who fought to safeguard their male kin against false rape accusations and vigilante justice, while black men concentrated on gaining property and political rights.[62] Yet even the difficulties of organizing with same-class men did not necessarily assure the success of women's cross-class alliances. Some working-class women remained in organizations dominated by men; some forged temporary alliances with more affluent women to achieve limited goals; and some struggled with the advantages and ambiguities of dual affiliations

century woman' (1978); and Lerner (ed.), *Black Women* (1972), 290–4. For the importance of women's control of economic resources to their status in society, see Sacks, *Sisters and Wives* (1979); and Brown, 'Iroquois women' (1975).

[59] See, Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, ch. 7; Gordon, *Woman's Body* (1976), chs 9 and 10; Zeidenstein (ed.), *Learning About Rural Women* (1979), introduction; and Seller, 'Education of the immigrant woman' (1982).

[60] The vast majority of charitable, missionary, moral reform, temperance, and anti-slavery societies were single-sex associations in the antebellum era as were the largest women's organizations at the turn of the century – the women's clubs, temperance societies and suffrage associations. For this same pattern in these and other movements, see Freedman,

'Separation as strategy' (1979).

[61] Quote from Lawson and Barton, 'Sex roles in social movements' (1980), 231. See also Tax, *Rising of the Women*, ch. 6; and Hyman, 'Immigrant women and consumer protest' (1980).

[62] See, Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), ch. 11. On black women's struggles to work with black men and/or white women, see Neverdon-Morton, 'The black women's struggle' (1978); Barnett, *On Lynching* (1969); and Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry* (1979). An excellent summary of differences in black men's and women's approach to public activism was presented by Darlene Clark Hines at the Southern Historical Association meetings in Charleston, South Carolina, in November 1983.

with same-class men and middle-class women. For instance, despite male takeover of the leadership positions in the tenant's rights movement and the kosher meat boycotts, women remained active in large numbers in both movements. Many black and white working-class women who joined forces with more affluent women in the anti-lynching crusade or the Women's Trade Union League only remained active until their immediate goal was achieved. Those working-class women who attempted to maintain dual affiliations with same-class men and other-class women did so at great personal cost.[63]

Whichever path working-class women chose, they demonstrated the limits of any universal notion of sisterhood. That women attempted cross-class alliances more frequently than men cannot be doubted and does indicate certain common-alities in the experience of womanhood in North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet evidence from the lives of slaves, mill operatives, miners' wives, immigrants, and southern industrial workers as well as from 'true women' indicates that there was no single woman's culture or sphere. There was a culturally dominant definition of sexual spheres promulgated by an economically, politically, and socially dominant group. That definition was firmly grounded in the sexual division of labor appropriate to that class, just as other definitions developed based on the sexual division of labor in other class and racial groups. All of these divisions were characterized by sufficient sex-stereotyping to assure the formation of distinct female circles of labor and distinct rituals and values rooted in that laboring experience. To date historians have focused on the parallels in the establishment of women's spheres across classes, races, and ethnic groups and have asserted certain commonalities among them, assuming their common origin in the modernization of society during the nineteenth century. A closer examination now reveals that no such universal sisterhood existed, and in fact that the development of a sense of community among various classes of women served as a barrier to an all-embracing bond of womanhood. Finally, it is now clear that privileged women were willing to wield their sex-specific influence in ways that, intentionally or unintentionally, exploited other women in the name of 'true-womanhood'.

The quest to integrate women into historical analysis has already moved beyond the search for sisterhood. Yet like charitable ladies, plantation mistresses, settle-ment house residents, and Women's Trade Union League founders of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's historians continue to employ the rhetoric of community despite the reality of conflict. In highlighting the importance of collective action for women and the centrality of woman-constructed networks for community-wide campaigns, feminist scholars have demonstrated women's historical agency. Now we must recognize that that agency is not only our legacy but also our labrys, and like any double-edged weapon it cuts both ways: women influenced and advocated change, but they did so within the context of their particular social and material circumstances.

Sisterhood – the sharing of essential emotional and economic resources among

[63] See, for example, Kessler-Harris, 'Organizing the unorganizable' (1971).

females – was central to the lives of nearly all groups of American women from
the antebellum era to the early twentieth century and was rooted in the sexual
division of labor in the family, the work-place, the community, and the political
arena. It was during this same period that cultural élites sought to impose a
universal definition of the female character on society-at-large through the 'cult
of true womanhood'. If women's historians now accept that ideology as the basis
for cross-class and inter-racial sisterhood, we only extend the hegemony of the
antebellum bourgeoisie. To recognize and illuminate the realities of all women's
historical experience, we must instead acknowledge that for most nineteenth- and
early twentieth-century women, and their modern counterparts, community was
more a product of material conditions and constraints than of ideological dictates.
And that therefore diversity, discontinuity, and conflict were as much a part of
the historical agency of women as of men.

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