Women and Gender in the Long 19th Century

Historiographical trends are most often defined by which questions or problems guide generations of scholarship. However, it is also possible to observe trends in scholarship based on historical time. In other words, scholars of a particular era of women’s history are often concerned with questions that differ from those who study a different historical period. These two approaches to historiographical analysis are not mutually exclusive. The latter simply offers a supplementary way of understanding and engaging a field of scholarship. This annotated bibliography shows that historiographical patterns emerge in scholarship on women in the colonial and antebellum period that are distinct from those of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Scholars of the earlier period are more often concerned with women’s economic, political, and social autonomy and influence. Discussions around the ideology of separate spheres and women’s economic lives continue to drive this literature. Some scholars argue, for example, that white women lost political and economic power in the post-revolutionary era, while others present evidence that some women had increased economic autonomy in the new republic. Comparative analyses of different groups of women (working class women, black women, Native American women, etc.), which characterize a particular historiographical moment in women’s history scholarship, extended these questions of if, when, or how women controlled their economic lives, contributed to political dialogue, or wielded some kind of social influence, to non-white women in the same historical period. For example, Theda Perdue considered the impact of Indian Removal in the antebellum period on Native American women’s political influence in their community and James Brooks highlighted the cultural capital embodied by captive women in indigenous borderlands. Black women’s historical experiences before the Civil War are highly determined in scholarship by slavery and racial oppression. But despite the bleak realities of slavery, scholars of antebellum black women still engage questions of power and autonomy among them, highlighting particularly the ways that black women resisted gendered forms of oppression.

Emancipation was a watershed in women’s history. How we understand those transformations in women’s historical experiences, though, depends in large part on how historians approach and narrate those stories. Scholars like Tera Hunter, Laura Edwards, and Thavolia Glymph offer some of the richest and most insightful analyses of black and white women’s experiences during Reconstruction, demonstrating that gender is an important lens through which to view the drama of the nation’s transition from slavery to freedom. Scholars of women in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era seem less concerned than scholars of the antebellum period with the extent of women’s economic autonomy and/or contributions to their households and more concerned with exploring women’s gendered and classed consciousness. Women’s political influence remains a central theme for scholars of the later era due in large part to its progressivist zeitgeist. For these scholars, it seems a combination of the fact of emancipation and later reformist impulses has in some ways stunted the application of race as a major analytical dimension of women’s history and constituted class as the major fault line. Glenda Gilmore and Janette Greenwood, for example, consider cross-racial coalitions for social

reform between women who share the same class. Although the authors examine race as an important barrier to the success of those alliances, their analyses are organized around the women’s classed experience. Studies of working class women, such as those on black women sex workers, are similarly exclusive. The striking dissimilarities between Darlene Clark Hine’s article in which she argues that black women’s silence around their sexuality was a response to their experiences with sexual violence and Hazel Carby’s article that highlights the very blatant sexual politics of women blues singers demonstrates the ascendance of class as the major organizing principle of post-Civil War women’s history. Cheryl Hicks is one scholar who has escaped this binary and considers both working class and middle class women in her analysis.

The inflection of the annotations below are related to historiographical trends, like those mentioned above, that I find most compelling. The patterns I have discovered emerged from employing both a more traditional historiographical analysis that centers on publication dates, and also a view of women’s history scholarship that is attentive to trends related to historical time. Overall, race and class mediate women’s history in every historical and historiographical period, but as this bibliography shows, the scholarly application of those analytics remain uneven and irregular.
Revolution-Era/Early Republic


While some authors have argued that white women experienced less autonomy after the American Revolution, Lebsock argues in *The Free Women of Petersburg* that women in Petersburg, Virginia were actually more independent and had more opportunities to self-determine in the post-revolutionary period. She illustrates that “fewer women were married, more women found work for wages, and more married women acquired separate estates.”

Rather than resulting from feminist activism or ideological shifts, Lebsock argues that economic turmoil and the attendant rise in male indebtedness made women more viable candidates to hold, protect, and pass on family wealth. Additionally, Lebsock argues that free black women were in some respects Petersburg’s most autonomous women. Although largely a product of racial oppression, Lebsock records high rates of gainful employment among black women and high incidences of female-headed black households. In Petersburg, Lebsock finds positive changes in women’s economic power and independence in the late eighteenth century. Because her study is highly local, it is difficult to determine whether Lebsock’s argument can be scaled up to make claims about women in the post-Revolutionary period throughout the republic. However, because her argument centers around economic autonomy, it doesn’t challenge scholarship that claims women lost political rights post-independence. Further, the tightening of constraints on women’s public lives could actually be interpreted as an attendant consequence of their increased economic autonomy.


In her monograph, Zagarri explores the stunted presence of women in early American politics. Her narrative is one of declension, in which she argues that women were welcomed as political actors and intellectual contributors in the late eighteenth and very early nineteenth century, but by the 1820s, were shut out of formal political life. As the political stage shifted from “out of doors and in the streets” to the ballot box, women found less opportunities to throw their hats in the ring of rights debates. It seems the “spherification” of labor extended to the political realm. These ideas taken together suggest that in the early decades of the nineteenth century a multilayered and ideologically totalizing construction of gender was taking form. Nancy Isenberg’s work, though, shows that if women lost their sanction to engage in those public debates, they never stopped developing their political philosophies and remained influential to those debates over rights and citizenship. Zagarri may have fallen into the separate spheres ideological trap and missed the more nuanced historical narrative of the nation’s female political tradition that Isenberg picks up in the antebellum period.

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In *Learning to Stand and Speak* Mary Kelley argues that education became an “alternative endowment” as the nation’s population became increasingly urban. Kelley uses the narratives of some well known and not so well known upper middle class white women who reflect increased interest in formal women’s education among the better classes. Like Lebsock, Kelley sees significant change in women’s experiences but finds this shift, instead, in the realm of emerging social spaces. Through formal education, women were able to cultivate skills that would allow them to participate more fully in the public sphere. Reasoning and rhetorical skills, as well as persuasion and discipline, which were developed in seminaries and female academies, equipped women to engage in civil society. Yet, these women were far from radicalized. The “post-revolutionary enduring compromise” kept women in subordinate positions in relation to men and allowed them to continue to claim moral authority inside the home. Her argument includes the best of both worlds, in a sense, instead of highlighting tension between women’s intellectual/political development and their domestication, Kelley illustrates how these characteristics developed in relation to one another, which makes for an interesting, and more useful, intervention in the separate spheres debate.


Like scholars before her that have highlighted the importance of women’s work to early American household economies, Hartigan-O’Connor’s *The Ties that Buy* centers around women’s participation in emerging markets. She argues that the late eighteenth century Atlantic port economy—Hartigan O’Connor focuses on Newport, Rhode Island, and Charleston, South Carolina—was largely inclusive—“gender, race, and rank all shaped the kinds of connections a person could make, but being female, being black, or being poor did not preclude participation.” Central to her argument is the texture of urban life within which lines of gender, class and race are blurred. In this space, the author characterizes women as “go-betweens” or intermediaries in social and economic life. By examining how women organized their homes, handled cash, earned and used credit, and traded goods in markets, Hartigan O’Connor restores women to the everyday revolution-era world of exchange. Like Lebsock again, Hartigan O’Connor challenges declension narratives that associate the late eighteenth century with decreased visibility of women in the growing credit economy. Hartigan O’Connor’s attention to the distinctiveness of urban space and the ways in which it blurs and complicates prevailing social hierarchies is useful to this historiography. However, each of her sites carries a legacy of the Atlantic creole “charter generations,” who populated these port cities in the previous century, engaged in trade, and exercised some level of autonomy based on their individual social and economic aptitude. Therefore, it seems her contribution is simply that white women were a part of this urban, commercial world as well, which is a fine one.

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In her article Jensen sought to challenge an oversimplified narrative of women’s work as it was rehearsed in mid to late twentieth century histories. Largely ignored by historians at the time, women’s household labor that produced goods for the market and for use are of primary concern to Jensen. Specifically, cloth making, butter making, and taking in boarders are of interest in this article because they brought cash and credit into the household economy. Jensen argues that that kind of production was a stage between subsistence and wage labor. This transition was complete by the 1920s and 1930s once “capitalist structures” became able to perform home-work more cheaply than women. The “transitional” nature of this mode of production, according to Jensen, constitutes the significance of women’s work for the household economy for our understanding of the development of capitalism. Since Jensen’s article, many scholars, including some discussed here such as Hartigan O’Connor and Laurel Ulrich, have built significantly on Jensen’s analysis and contributed much more to our understanding of women’s participation in various early American household economies.


Boydston’s *Home and Work* builds on earlier scholarship on women’s waged labor, however her focus is on work performed within rather than outside of the home. Historians like Linda Kerber around the same time as the publication of this book were working to dispel the myth of “separate spheres,” and in her 1990 work, Boydston sought, in part, to trace the emergence of that doctrine. She found that it was a byproduct of the rise of industrial capitalism, which included an increasing identification of work with wages, and the masculinization of market-oriented wage labor. As Joan Jensen disclosed ten years earlier, Boydston illustrates the ways in which gender, as a cultural force, was central to processes of capitalist development in the United States. This marks an important historiographical moment because Boydston and her peers successfully historicized and deconstructed the gendered ideologies that had disrupted the project of understanding and telling women’s histories.


With *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard*, Laurel Ulrich has contributed a gem to our historical memory of early America. Ballard’s diary, that she kept for twenty-seven years, is the cornerstone of Ulrich’s study of marriage, medicine, and childbirth in eighteenth century New England. Ballard’s diary elucidates the fact that although women’s and men’s realms of work and influence were in some ways separate, women’s responsibilities were crucial to the maintenance of the family economy. Ulrich describes two family economies within Ballard’s household, one of which Ballard operated nearly autonomously and the other she indirectly impacted but fully understood. Further, Ballard’s diary offers a counter narrative to one that emphasizes the marginalization of female midwives by semi-professional male doctors. In her story, female midwives remain central, at least in rural Maine, to the care and management of
child birth. Like Hartigan O’Connor and Lebsock, Ulrich sheds new light on the economic lives of women in early America.


In *Public Vows*, Nancy Cott argues that although marriage is in large part viewed as a private relationship in the United States, it has always been a vehicle of national ideology. Thus, she seeks to historicize the institution of marriage and its impact on individual self-understandings. Specifically, how the marital institution shapes the gender order is of central importance to Cott. While the idea of consent in marriage has been mythologized, Cott points to the ways that Americans are in many ways strongly encouraged to enter into the institution. Cott’s central project is to nationalize the history of marriage. Marriage should not be considered exclusively an issue of state authority, but a matter of national ideological import. It is interesting to think about this book in relation to Gutierrez’s *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*; both authors interpret marriage as a tool for social organization. However, Cott emphasizes the popular, romantic myth that operates around marriage in the U.S. context that is not as evident in the context of the Spanish-Mexican borderlands.


In Ramon Gutierrez’s interdisciplinary study of colonial New Mexico, he uses marriage to understand social relations between indigenous pueblo cultures and their Spanish conquistadors in colonial New Mexico. A history from below, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*, deals with the “complex web of interactions between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, Spaniard and Indian.” As those tense interactions take violent turns in events like the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, Gutierrez emphasizes the centrality of marriage to reconciliation and maintenance of social hierarchy amidst these imperial encounters. While Brooks highlights the opportunities women had to negotiate their fate in these colonial spaces, Gutierrez points to the boundaries of that social mobility. Although *indios de rescates* were incorporated into Spanish society, for example, they populated a lower status against which their captors could define themselves. This history is crucial to understanding the contests over race that play out in the region and among the descendants of its inhabitants in the late nineteenth and even into the late twentieth century.


In this article, Brooks poses an intervention in borderlands historiography through his examination of the unique experiences of women in networks of human trade during the Spanish and Mexican occupations of New Mexico. In this context, female captives were valued (albeit as

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useful commodities) in negotiations between communities that were woven into “vital, and violent, webs of interdependence.” Women often served as cultural intermediaries, diplomats, between their native communities and their cross-cultural captors. Brooks demonstrates that although women were often exploited commodities, whose status was dependent on relations between men, they were in many ways influential agents of their own destinies on this colonial stage. Moreover, Native American and Spanish women’s efforts to protect themselves and their children wielded an enduring cultural impact. Brooks’s article contributes to borderlands scholarship about identity formation in imperial spaces. Ideas about race and the possibilities of cultural amalgamation played a major role in New World contests and it’s fascinating to see how women, above all, bear their inscriptions.


By using gender as a category of analysis to examine the Cherokee Trail of Tears, Theda Perdue reveals that existing accounts of Indian removal miss how Cherokee women’s experiences differed significantly from their male counterparts. While women traditionally had a voice in government within the Cherokee nation, their position changed dramatically in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Cherokees were traditionally matrilineal and matrilocal—children belonged to the clan of their mother and relatives were traced through the mother’s line, men also lived with their wives in homes owned by the woman’s family, and up until the 1790s, women participated in treaty negotiations. As the Cherokee nation became more dependent on Anglo-Americans for survival, women lost status in Cherokee society. In return for aid from the United States government, Cherokee were encouraged to convert themselves to “replicas of white pioneer farmers” in anticipations that they would then cede additional territory. Some Cherokee men gained limited power from these arrangements but women, on the whole, lost political power. These women are not the “cultural intermediaries” Brooks describes in “This Evil Extends Especially to the Feminine Sex.” The U.S. imperial project did not include the incorporation of Native American populations into the polity, and thus Cherokee women were left little room to negotiate their position.


Anne Hyde, in Empires, Nations and Families, offers a new narrative of the trans-Mississippi West between 1806 and 1860 centered around family networks. Hyde argues that the West was hardly the vast, unsettled frontier rife for Anglo-American conquest that exists in our historical imagination. Rather, a unique trade and political culture thrived in the region and was grounded in interpersonal relationships between intercultural families—including Native, European, and American dimensions. Hyde joins historians who have characterized the West as a “middle ground” in terms of cultural interaction. In many ways, though, Hyde complicates those cultural distinctions by highlighting the complex constructions of race and nation that operated in this

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liminal space. Hyde’s book adds to recent scholarship on the too-little understood history of the highly mobile and trans-cultural peoples of the North American West.

ANTEBELLUM AMERICA


Guidotti-Hernández offers an interdisciplinary, revisionist borderlands study with *Unspeakable Violence.* At play in the text are critical theories of identity and subject formation, transnational and feminist ideologies, and methods of historiographical critique leveled against existing historical accounts of various moments in the development of the US-Mexico borderlands. Violence is the primary analytical lens through which Guidotti-Hernández revises existing narratives. Like Spivak’s conceptualization of the subaltern, for example, Guidotti-Hernández illuminates how the subjectivities of borderlands women swept up in imperial violence are silenced in nationalist historical narratives that miss the multiplicity of their oppression. As various systems of social hierarchy, including lesser examined non-white racial ideologies, as those Ramón Gutiérrez has examined, collide, women most often suffer personal injury, and doubly so, as they are silenced in the historical record. Contemporary nationalist mythologies characterized by static representations of heroines, victims, and villains, are called into question in this book, as intercultural and state-sanctioned violence is highlighted as the principle cultural intermediary. Given recent examinations of identity formation in U.S.-Mexican borderlands, some of which are included here, it seems Guidotti-Hernández has created somewhat of a strawman academic in order to emphasize the importance of her contributions. However, her argument that contemporary political movements rely on false static cultural binaries, such as the Chicano movement, I think, is effective.


Camp’s application of James Scott’s conceptualization of “rival geographies” anchors her analysis of the gendered experience of slavery in the plantation South. Camp intervenes in historiographical debates around various forms of slave resistance. By focusing on “place,” both physical and social, Camp uncovers lesser-examined patterns of female slave resistance. She shows that plantation power relations were embedded in physical space, and also that men and women were unevenly “contained” within that space. Men, for example, had more opportunities to run away, but women participated in this form of resistance by preparing food or offering their homes as hiding places for truant slaves. Space maintains its significance during the Civil War and through the Jim Crow-era. In wartime the plantation spatial order was disrupted and many women seized the opportunity to exercise semi-autonomous mobility and fled their plantations in search of Union army camps. Segregation during Jim Crow, according to Camp, is an attempt at restoring old spatial arrangements warranted by a reinvigorated ideology of social place. Camp joins scholars of alternative black geographies such as Flávio Gomes and Yuko Miki, but her emphasis on gendered geo(graphic)politics is an important contribution to slavery studies.

Stevenson’s 1996 study of families in Loudon County, Virginia examines white and free and enslaved black families in Loudon County. Taking the family as a unit of analysis allows Stevenson to capture ideologies of race and gender at play in the context of the slave South. Like other scholars, she emphasizes the fact that the southern white patriarchy was predicated on male control over women’s sexual lives. Further, she highlights the instability of free and enslaved black family networks in a racially stratified social world dependent on the profitability of slave labor. One of the most interesting contributions here is the description of various family structures among enslaved blacks. Matrifocal kinship networks, abroad marriages, and extended families connected distant slave communities and offered some sense of control in matters of child rearing and marriage. This challenges the idea that the nuclear family was ever a “sociocultural” ideal for African Americans and raises interesting questions about the legacy of those alternative kinship organizations in the post Civil War South. However, as Stevenson revises arguments for the slave nuclear family, she maintains that all forms of familial organization in Loudon County were subordinated to the institution of slavery and white patriarchs. This reading depoliticizes black kinship organization in the antebellum period and other scholars like Dylan Penningroth have since offered alternative interpretations of extended black family organization.


Dylan Penningroth’s central theme in *The Claims of Kinfolk* is how black kinship functioned as a framework for controlling people and property. Black kinship organizations, Penningroth argues, were sites of contests over power. A resistance model that lauds the black family as a cultural and social resource for survival obscures conflict within black communities. By privileging a black-white power relation, scholars have neglected formidable struggles over community and family—struggles over who belonged, and what it meant to belong. Penningroth disavows the idea that the black family sociocultural ideal merely shifted from communal African cultural values to an imitation of American individualism. Penningroth sees continuity in the function of black families from slavery to freedom in that they continue to serve as complex and malleable networks to instruct labor and property agreements, and the terms of mutual obligation. What differs in the emancipation period is that the nature of the power relations between blacks is transformed. Letters to Freedmen’s Bureau agents illustrate how freedmen and women understood their obligations as family members and also what they expected and felt they could demand from other members of their kinship networks. Penningroth argues that emancipation introduced new stakes, new players, and new options for contestation for kinship among blacks. In attempts to emphasize the significance of culture in the study of black life in slavery, it seems some scholars, for a time, left black people’s labor under examined. By recentering labor in his study of the black family, Penningroth gleaned new meaning from familiar records.

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Yee argues that black women activists were able to form a philosophy of black female activism through their participation in the abolitionist movement. Rather than focus on individual women activists, Yee seeks to restore to the narrative of the abolitionist movement ordinary black women who played a “collective role” in the movement. Further, as black women collectively weighed competing social expectations, like “female respectability” and race leadership, as well as forms of oppression, namely sexism and racism, they crafted a particular racial and gendered ideology unique to their individual experiences. What this means for historians of black feminism in later decades is not explored, but Yee’s is an important restorative project that opens new questions about the gendered nature of black politics.


Laboring Women is a remarkable contribution to studies of slavery in the Atlantic World. Jennifer Morgan uses “women’s reproductive identity” to frame her comparative study of slavery in the Caribbean and the American South. Morgan explores how slave-owners constructed a cultural logic around African slave women’s physicality that served to naturalize their enslavement as well as their owners’ unmitigated access to their bodies and the products of their unique labors. These experiences of exploitation would differ across space and time and contribute to unique female slave subjectivities. This is particularly evident in her discussion of the transfer of agricultural knowledge between women and men as slave-owners disrupted traditional gender divisions of labor. Childbirth, though, would remain central to the development of slave women’s identities and gendered forms of resistance. Some scholars argue that there is little new in Morgan’s monograph, but I think subtler insights are brought to bear by her comparative analysis. What’s more important is that Morgan is highly attuned to the negotiations over the meaning of African slave labor and the transformations of these slave societies over time.


Glymph’s Out of the House of Bondage, a forceful historiographical intervention, pushes against common understandings of southern white women’s gentility and black women’s affectionate intimacy with or at least gendered relatability to their slave mistresses in order to demonstrate that the plantation household was no less a place of work for female slaves than the field, nor were white mistresses any less violent or cruel than their husbands. This paradigm for understanding slavery and the plantation household demands historians reconsider black and white southern women’s experiences and relationships to each other, “separate and together,” during and after slavery. The social relations of domestic labor shaped both groups’
understanding of themselves and each other. It is only after scholars acknowledge the plantation household as a place of work that the meanings freedwomen attached to their labor become clear. No scholar of black women in the nineteenth century after Tera Hunter and Thavolia Glymph can avoid taking seriously the consciousness of working class black women.


In *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, Karen Halttunen poses the American middle class of the mid-nineteenth century as a defensive group who acted as proprietors of their status. Rapid urbanization in this period made older forms of recognizing social identity obsolete in a “world of strangers.” Advice manuals from the period instruct in matters of etiquette and mourning meant to secure one’s own status and snuff out trickery in matters of esteem. Confidence men were most threatening because of their “placelessness.” The anonymity of the urban environment proved unsettling for who would become the “resolutely middle class.” I think this is the most interesting dimension of Haltunen’s argument; while some are resistant to these social transformations, others embrace their unmooring in ways that seem to reflect a self-made, pioneering “American” spirit. Again, the cloud of nineteenth century gender formation looms large as mobile women are particularly threatening to the status quo. I am afraid Halttunen’s analysis assumes a widely shared adherence to “Victorian-isms.” In *Re-Reading Sex*, for example, Helen Horowitz reveals a number of alternative frameworks for understanding sex that operated in the nineteenth century. It could be that the group Halttunen is concerned with did in fact adhere to the broad Victorian framework, however, if we take Horowitz’s argument, it seems they would have been battling against those competing social impulses all along. In any case, the mid-nineteenth century was a particularly eventful period in American history and thus her characters might have felt that threats to their moral authority had taken new forms.


Stephanie McCurry argues in *Masters of Small Worlds* that yeoman farmers found commonality with wealthy planters through their shared experience of “mastery.” The two groups were governed by similar social logics, based on the principle of the master-slave relationship—the things and people belonging to a certain household being organized in relation and subordination to the white male head. In her attempt to explain the fact that by 1860 there was popular consensus among slaveholding and non-slaveholding whites that secession was politically necessary, McCurry emphasizes commonality over class conflict. Environmental factors like the emergence of anti-abolitionist vigilante groups and an evangelical movement bent on preserving the Christian South and saving the souls of the rest of nation effectively dissolved or rationalized what distinctions there were between yeomen and planters. Yeoman farmers in South Carolina

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12 Ibid., 196.
did not, in fact, exhibit egalitarian impulses as some historians have claimed. Rather, in ways akin to Bardaglio’s argument in *Reconstructing the Household*, McCurry argues that yeoman farmers were intensely committed to southern ideologies of dependence and inequality. McCurry’s argument erases the possibility that non-slaveholding whites could have developed a group consciousness in the antebellum era. Although patriarchy continued to rule social relations, class conflict, or some variation of it, might have played a larger role in the antebellum period than McCurry suggests. During the period of Reconstruction we see hard ideological work being done in the political realm to unify poor and elite white men against newly freed blacks, which suggests that the bonds in an antebellum cult of manhood may not have been as strong as she asserts.


Bardaglio ponders the impact of slavery and emancipation on the regulations of relations within southern white families and how its legacy continued to shape legal attitudes toward women, children, and families after the Civil War. He focuses on appellate court cases to illustrate the prevalence of regionalist meanings of the household and familial hierarchy in southern life. Bardaglio places concerns over the maintenance of the “fabric” of southern households at the center of secession debates. Popular ideological constructions of the southern household, though, included inherent contradictions. If black slaves were considered members of the southern family and household, how did one understand, or in this case prosecute, interracial sex, and based on what principles? Bardaglio’s answer is that court cases from the time reveal that people (jurists) held competing ideas about what constituted appropriate familial relations, who needed protection, and from whom. Bardaglio intervenes in the historiography of southern family history by showing a persistent trend away from legally sanctioned patriarchal family relations toward, in the absence of slavery, a legal culture grounded in principles of contractualism that would in some ways offer new rationale for antebellum southern relations disrupted by war and emancipation. I think Bardaglio’s examination of appellate court cases makes for a compelling argument about the transformation of not just the physical southern family/household over this period but also the ideological fallout of its disruption.


In the same period that middle and upper class women were settling into their positions of moral authority grounded in emerging constructions of gender, laboring women were forging their own brand of womanhood. Stansell’s *City of Women* is a study of such women in New York in the time between the founding of the republic and the Civil War. Working class women constituted a new dimension of the larger social world as they “spilled out of their family households” into masculinized, urban spaces. In that space, Stansell describes a volatile “dialectic of female vice and female virtue”—a highly visible and semi-autonomous world of women that, at once, stoked the anxieties of the female, propertied class and shored up their claims to moral authority.

15 Ibid., 221.
Stansell’s primary intervention, though, is her argument that working class women were not merely antipodes of better women. Working class women developed a community characterized by “watchful generosity and communal judgment,” and also a collective political language to express their unique experience of oppression and the attendant values that had grown out of it. Women like Emma Goldman, according to Stansell, sharpened their social critiques within this political counter culture made by and for urban, working class women. In the book Stansell uses the intersectional experiences of working class women to interpret their unique class-consciousness. Like many scholars who study “subaltern” communities, Stansell’s source base is limited to those that are about her subjects, as opposed to emanating from the subjects themselves. Historians like Susan Glenn and Leon Fink have examined working class subjectivity and political consciousness through careful understandings of immigrant background and culture, Stansell’s work could have benefited from that kind of deep analysis.


Schweninger’s chapter highlights the challenges faced by free black women in the South before the Civil War. Similar to Lebsock’s discussion of free black women in Virginia, Schweninger explains that black women controlled a substantial share of black wealth as they outnumbered men in the free black population. Like other scholars of black women in the antebellum South, such as Beverly Bond who studies black women in antebellum Tennessee, Schweninger describes the difficulty those women faced in trying to maintain their families, livelihoods, and freedom while negotiating black codes and a dangerous proximity to slavery. While free black women constituted a distinct class in the antebellum period, it seems that only after emancipation scholars begin to seek evidence of a classed consciousness among different groups of black women.


In Feminism and Suffrage, Ellen Dubois examined the woman’s rights movement beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and continuing through to the establishment of NSWA and AWSA after the Civil War. The book is not simply a laudatory story of the early women’s suffrage movement, nor is it a critique of that political project. Rather, Dubois sought to argue that the significance of that movement lay in the fact that it fostered an independent feminist movement. Although she acknowledged that early suffragists were politically educated by the abolitionist movement, she argues that alliances between suffragists and other reform groups sharpened a feminist social critique and cohered a large body of women activists. Dubois built on the work of scholars like Caroll Smith-Rosenberg and Barbara Welter to argue that, however limited in its scope and critique, the ideological origins of an independent feminist movement lay in the ideas and actions of early suffragists. Here, in the decade before it came under fire by scholars of this period, the ideology of separate spheres is presented ultimately as a resource for women activists.

16 Ibid., 218.

With *Sex and Citizenship*, Isenberg joined scholars who sought to avoid using the suffrage movement to guide inquiries into women’s antebellum political discourse. Isenberg took an approach almost opposite to Ellen Dubois by exploring how women activists contributed to broader rights discourses as they related their causes to other public debates like those around capital punishment or U.S. territorial expansion. Isenberg’s analysis contributed to the dismantling of the separate sphere model used by earlier historians to understand women’s experiences and also their politics. However, she did not deny the impact of a separate spheres ideology on women in this period and the fact that women’s political concerns, not to mention political consciousness, were in many ways shaped by their awareness of that oppressive social construction.

**CIVIL WAR/RECONSTRUCTION**


In *Rereading Sex*, Helen Horowitz seeks to challenge notions of “victorian sexuality” in histories of the nineteenth century. Her study dispels the notion of a singular Victorian sexual culture in which men and women were all sexually repressed. Instead, she argues that four distinct sexual cultures operated in the nineteenth century that have been obscured by the kinds of sources historians consult to find evidence of sexual representation. Court records, Horowitz argues, reveal that the law reinforced the power of one side of the sexual conversation and forced others underground. But in practice, no single sexual framework reigned supreme. By the 1870s, though, severe censorship, embodied in the Comstock Law, effectively silenced proponents of those lesser known philosophies of sexuality that have since eluded historians.


*Gendered Strife and Confusion* is a study of Reconstruction-era Granville County, North Carolina. Over this tumultuous period, Democrats relentlessly pursued political control in the region. Edwards joins scholars like Glenda Gilmore and Victoria Bynum in dismantling the “public/private” social divide and argues that at the center of these battles were gender ideologies (played out in the home) that existed among elite whites first, and later among lower class whites and black Americans. The end of slavery had destabilized the southern household. Like Bardaglio, Edwards argues that the ideology of domesticity took hold of southern women and white men were empowered as heads of their households in new ways. Freed people, and common whites to some extent, in their efforts to claim political, economic and social rights, mimicked elite white family structures. This, according to Edwards, would seal the fate of the Republican challenge to elite, white, male authority. Because other groups adopted similar

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patriarchal principles in efforts to claim rights, they left in tact basic tenets of the antebellum power structure.


Tera Hunter’s study of working class black women in Atlanta, Georgia demonstrates the various ways, despite relentless racial oppression, those women made their freedom after the Civil War. Hunter explores the struggles of cooks, maids, child-nurses, laundresses, and other black female servants against conditions of poverty, unsympathetic and abusive public authorities, in addition to the efforts of their elite, middle-class sisters who sought to contain, repress, and sanitize them. Like Stansell and Deutsch, Hunter uncovers a world made and engaged by laboring women. By discovering the networks black working class women maintained, what leisures they enjoyed, and how they generally found pleasure amidst much main and suffering, Hunter gives readers a sense of how those women defined their freedom and fought to protect it. This book laid much groundwork and opened questions for later studies of working black women and, as is evident in many recent books mentioned here, Hunter’s conclusions and ideas continue to be meaningfully engaged.


Greenwood’s study, located in the New South city of Charlotte, examines alliances between blacks and whites of the self-titled “better class” that reveal the forgotten alternatives in race relations of the post-Reconstruction period. Greenwood builds on one of C. Vann Woodward’s theses, that between the end of Reconstruction and the establishment of rigid segregation, race relations “appeared to be more fluid.” She also expands on his conceptualization of the middle class “new man” who emerged in the post war period and lends credence to the “New South” nomenclature. In addition, though, Greenwood pays special attention to the ways that black and white women helped define class in Charlotte. Much like their white counterparts, black women in the New South sought moral authority through interracial cooperation with white reform women, in the temperance movement for example, and leading moral reform efforts of their own—their beneficiaries being women of the mass black lower class. This is of course, ultimately, a declension narrative. By the 1890s the biracial coalition of the better classes would give way to the Jim Crow social order.

GILDED AGE/PROGRESSIVE ERA


In this sweeping historical narrative of illegal abortion in the United States Leslie Reagan analyzes the interactions between medical professionals, state authorities, and women in the

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“practice, policing, and politics of abortion.”\(^{19}\) The American Medical Association’s decade long campaign to make abortion illegal was won and new laws criminalizing abortion swept across the country. The Comstock Law included abortion and birth control in anti-obscenity legislation at the federal level. Reagan delineates four stages of the “epoch of illegal abortion,”\(^{20}\) but what is most significant is the fact that women never stopped demanding them. Finally, in the 1950s, the movement to legalize abortion, led by physicians (ironically), took shape. Reagan’s study does not suffer from its chronological breadth, perhaps because she uses Chicago as her single site of analysis. She succeeds in capturing how social meanings of abortion changed over time, and how the demographics of abortion change according to all sorts of social factors. Most importantly, she illustrates that, ultimately, in continuing to demand control over their reproductive lives, women influenced legislation and public opinion to reflect at least the principle that they should have it.


Pascoe locates the origins of cultural feminism, a strain of feminism that emphasizes gender difference in order to make authorial claims based on essential gender characteristics, in the activities of protestant missionary women in the American West in the late nineteenth century. White middle class Protestant women’s reform efforts in the West reflect an interaction between class-based systems of social control and the ways in which societies create and reproduce ideas about gender. At stake in the West was not simply moral authority, but female moral authority. This is an important distinction according to Pascoe because it indicates that middle class Protestant women were agents in the construction of gender norms and expectations. They exhibited a strain of feminism that gleaned empowerment from gender spherification. The drama of the Woman’s Era was acted out on the western stage, with Native American, Chinese, Mormon and “unmarried mothers” cast as the beneficiaries of the white, middle class, and most importantly, female, moralizing force. In the last act, though, reform women were upstaged by their funding sources and those whose authority was based on new ideals of “scientific charity.”\(^{20}\)


Stanley shows how, as Americans did away with chattel slavery, the ideology of contract that emphasized personal freedom and self-ownership proved ambiguous in practice. The marriage contract highlighted the internal contradictions of that ideology in the post Civil War period as women were considered at once the property of their husbands and also sold their labor in the market. As freedpeople gained the right to contract in the form of marriage bonds and wage labor, the right to women and their labor remained in the hands of men. The criminalization of prostitutes according to Stanley exposed the inherent conflict between individual freedom of contract and the maintenance of the male-dominated household for which the dependency of


\(^{20}\) Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 188.
women and children was necessary. Stanley’s argument is limited, though, by her focus on wage labor. Dylan Penningroth, for example, explains that the success of black families in the post-emancipation period, at least in the South, depended on their ability to amass labor power. It seems in that context ideas about dependency and contract freedom might have been considered differently.


Carby looks beyond the African American female literary canon in order to comprehend black women’s sexual politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In doing so, she finds an “empowered presence of women in the blues.” As black women writers offered fictional representations of the black female experience, they often avoided the real “cultural transition and confrontation” of urban displacement. Carby wrests black women’s sexuality from the mediating influence of black middle class respectability (or perhaps shame or guilt), and restores it to its more authentic urban geography. She gleans the gendered experience of migration from women’s blues song and emphasizes that these “organic intellectuals” had been shaped by mobility. Black women arrived in northern cities both freer from histories of sexual violence and freer to unabashedly explore and proclaim their boundless sexuality. Carby’s argument is strikingly different from Hine’s argument about migrant women and their response to sexual violence, and also Hick’s conclusion that working class women were invested in respectability politics. Because Carby acknowledges that she is focused on a particular group of women, though, I don’t think her argument is any less convincing. She also consults a source, song lyrics, produced by her historical subject.


For the Freedom of Her Race is a history of women who entered electoral politics upon migrating from the South to northern communities. This book begins at the close of Reconstruction as race relations in the South began to quickly deteriorate. At the very same time black men were being disfranchised in the South, black women were gaining access to the ballot box in many locales. Women in Illinois were among that group. Like other historians, such as Glenda Gilmore and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Materson highlights the reform efforts of black women in the “Woman’s Era,” but she is primarily concerned with the ways in which a “woman’s era philosophy” was manifested within the realm of electoral politics. The southern orientation of the black women’s political philosophy is of particular significance in this narrative. Migrant women who maintained familial and social ties to the South incorporated Democratic abuses there into their political arguments. Black women’s dynamic political philosophies shaped their expectations and critiques of the Republican party, with which most were affiliated before the 1930s realignment, and ultimately led some to shift their political allegiance. Materson seeks to demonstrate that women were active and influential in formal, electoral politics during the woman’s era, not simply in the realm of moral reform.

In *Women and the City*, Sarah Deutsch probes the lives of working class women in urban space. Like Stansell’s examination of an earlier period, Deutsch argues that working class women’s lives were not over-determined by prevailing notions of womanhood and respectability. Rather, the ways in which they “designed, appropriated, and reappropriated” cultural institutions, social agencies, and public venues to suit their needs and aspirations reflected a countervailing conscientiousness.21 She states, “working class women saw workers/wives/mothers not as multiple but as a single-subject position.”22 Moreover, those women’s interactions with urban spaces and institutions were “self-conscious demands to reorder space and power in their own interests in ways that did not fragment their lives into ‘work’ and ‘home,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘class.’”23 To be sure, Deutsch explains that these women’s actions, like waging anti-spitting campaigns or advocating for female police surveillance in their communities were not always consciously subversive of any particular set of judgments that ordained a position for them. However, they constituted a powerful alternative geography of the city that served working class women’s needs.


Gilmore’s study of middle class black women activists like Charlotte Hawkins Brown illustrates that as black men lost political power after Reconstruction, black women emerged as forceful community leaders beyond the realm of electoral politics. Gilmore highlights the interracial coalitions black women forged to advance their reform efforts and their stories allow her to cull an uplifting narrative out of what some scholars have referred to as the “nadir” of African American history. Gilmore’s analysis is limited, though, by the focus on middle class black women and lacks an analysis of how working class blacks contributed to or participated in community-based uplift politics in this period. But scholars have since built on this important work to contribute to a more comprehensive sketch of black life and politics at the turn of the twentieth century.


Cheryl Hicks uses institutional records related to women who were imprisoned in the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford and the New York State Prison for Women at Auburn to recover black working class women’s understandings of themselves. Rather than focusing on the ways that working class communities struggled for survival, engaged in political activism related to labor concerns or how informal economies emerged from a lack of employment and low-paying wage jobs as many scholars have, such as Tera Hunter and Cynthia Blair for example,

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22 Ibid., 52.
23 Ibid.
Hicks illustrates that working class women were, too, invested in the politics of respectability. In this way, Hicks intervenes in discussions of late nineteenth century racial uplift projects that center the ideas and actions of middle class black women and do not include a critical analysis of the consciousness of those women were the objects of reform. Some aspects of Hicks’ analysis are offered in the style of Christine Stansell’s *City of Women* but, Hicks builds on Tera Hunter’s approach by attending to the complex interactions between middle and working class women.


*Recasting American Liberty* is an investigation of how personal liberty came to be defined among Americans in a period of rapid industrialization and technological progress. Welke’s study is a legal history that begins in 1865 and continues through the Progressive Era. By examining suits brought against corporations relating to accidental injury, nervous shock, and racial segregation throughout this period, Welke seeks to show that American notions of personal liberty were dramatically mediated by the realities of late nineteenth century modern innovations. Further, she demonstrates how modern forms of transportation became terrains of struggle over class, racial, and gender hierarchies. She shows for example that the dangers of rail transportation, including severe injury and sometimes death, “narrowed the distance between manly action and womanly dependence.” In order to resolve this gender leveling, Welke argues that men and women made gendered legal arguments in personal injury suits that restored order. In addition, as black middle class women tried to assert their “lady” hood on railcars, they threatened existing racial hierarchies and were routinely denied the privileges of white womanhood by the court. Overall, Welke argues “by mapping urban spaces as male or female, unsafe or safe, private businessmen and urban planners attempted to impose social order on an increasingly chaotic urban landscape.” This is an interesting look at a major historical turning point where gender and racial constructions were necessarily fashioned anew as the faulty logics of those systems were brought into sharp relief.


Katherine Osburn’s article examines the Office of Indian Affairs’s efforts to reform Ute sexual and marital practices in early twentieth century southwestern Colorado. Obsurn shows that the OIA’s “civilization” project hinged on policing women’s sexuality. Like white women, Ute women could be bastions of morality for their community, and it was the OIA’s mission to make it so. Native American women were punished for “sexually immoral” behavior more often than men—Osburn cites only one case of sexual impropriety in which a male was accused of rape. Osburn argues, though, that these women struggled to maintain their sexual autonomy. She reads their sexual activity/misconduct as intentionally disruptive or self-serving, or in some cases, a means to an end—some women, for example, were sent back to their families if they became

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25 Ibid., 282.
pregnant. Something like an epilogue to Pascoe’s *Relations of Rescue*, “To Build up the Morals” depicts terse and often violent relations between Native American women and male OIA agents, who had taken over the operation of reform efforts by this time.


*Daughters of the Shtetl* is a social/cultural history of immigration that uses Jewish women migrants in American cities to illustrate the “cultural renegotiations” that occurred between Old and New worlds in the early twentieth century. This “transitional generation” negotiated between the values of their sending communities and their developing identities as laboring women, and even breadwinners, in American cities. Jewish women migrants forged hybrid political subjectivities that were anchored by their ethnicity but tempered by their working class experience. Although they rejected female inferiority, they valued and nurtured partnerships with men, which distinguished them from any “cult” of women. Glenn joins scholars like Annelise Orleck who have written about the political and class-consciousness of Russian Jewish immigrant women and their centrality to building a labor movement among working class women in northern cities.


Cynthia Blair’s book is a unique look at black women’s sex work in Chicago during through the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. By decentering the triumph of progressivism and national trends including the strict policing of urban vice, Blair claims her work centers black sex workers in the mapping of geographies of race and sex in turn of the century Chicago. To explain the import of her work, Blair refers to authors, like Darlene Clark Hine, who have pointed to silences around black women’s sexuality. Although they were not, of course, singular authors of their own destinies, Blair argues that sex workers accessed some avenues to economic self-reliance and self-respect through this urban world of leisure. However, by enacting their individual autonomy through migration, black women sex workers found themselves, by the twentieth century, increasingly fixed in a racialized urban geography. White Chicagoans were drawn to the 22nd St Levee, which held black “culture,” including black prostitutes, fixed in space and time, primed for their ultimate consumption. This book draws on the arguments made by both Hazel Carby and Darlene Clark Hine. Both of their characterizations of a fraught black female sexuality in the context of migration appear in Blair’s work. The black sex workers resemble Carby’s blues singers while Chicago’s black middle class women struggle to distance themselves from a shared past of sexual violence and exploitation at the hands of white men.


An interesting comparison to Blair’s book, *Spectacular Wickedness* is a study of New Orleans famous red-light district, Storyville, in the same period. At Lulu White’s Mahogany Hall wealthy white men, for a price, could find women advertised as “octaroons” to fulfill their sexual fantasies. Emily Landau argues that Mahogany Hall was typical of Storyville, New Orleans
where disturbingly real sexualized racial fantasies were played out. Unlike Blair’s book, though, sex workers don’t sit quite at the center of this story. Landau states early in the book that she prefers to use the term prostitute as opposed to sex worker because she believes the former overemphasizes the amount of autonomy the women actually had. Rather, Landau is interested in arguing that white male patriarchy, based on sexual control of black and white women, was actually reproduced in Mahogany Hall and by the women who worked there. She argues “even as it defied social order, Storyville reified a sexual racial hierarchy” in which black female sexuality was disparaged, black male sexuality was violently suppressed, and white male sexual dominance was preserved. Both Blair and Landau, though, include remarkable images of black women arrested for prostitution that add to their project of meaningfully integrating non-middle class black women’s narratives into our historical knowledge.


In her article Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Midwest, Darlene Clark Hine argues that rape and the threat of rape led black women to develop a “culture of dissemblance” as a mechanism of control and protection over their sexual lives. Dissemblance, according to Hine, is defined by the “behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” The abundant narratives of sexual violence against black women that appear in their literature constitute the “appearance of disclosure” that actually obscures their more authentic, and self-defined sexuality. The wholesale rejection of their sexuality in public “facilitated Black women’s mental and physical survival in a hostile world.” Like Carby’s article on women’s blues, migration is central in Hine’s interpretation of black women’s sexual expression or, in this case, repression. Carby, though, highlights those bold and unapologetic proclamations of black women’s sexual lives found in blues music. However, both women assume a particular relationship between migration and sexual violence against black women that I think invites further probing.

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28 Ibid., 920.