

Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints

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Opening with Thavolia Glymph's understanding of the Civil War as the 'most racially gendered and regionally segregated historiographical space in U.S. History', Judith Giesberg and Randall M. Miller present 16 essays exploring the ways that race, gender, and place informed women's Civil War era experiences (p. ix). Moving from politics and wartime mobilisation to Reconstruction, and Civil War memory, the paired thematic essays bring into sharper relief the diversity and complexity of southern and northern women's experiences. Although wedded to a north-south paradigm, the editors and the assembled authors upend previous understandings of Civil War era women 'as heroes, angels, or martyrs' (p. xii). Rather, they seek to 'uncover the complex women's self-emancipation, healing, and commemorative work' while simultaneously making 'room for women whose wartime actions are less commendable: self-serving, perhaps violent; and criminal, even' (p. xii). Moving thematically and chronologically, these 'series of investigations,' reveal these women 'as complicated and fully human' (p. xii). While showing progress has been made since Glymph's original claim, according to Giesberg and Miller, the volume demonstrates that more work 'remains to be done,' and advances possible directions for future scholarly inquiry (p. xviii).

Elizabeth Varon's essay opens by focussing on politics on the eve of the Civil War. She explores the diversity of southern women's political activism and contends it is 'vital for understanding the war's causes, course, and consequences' (p. 3). She views the competing pro-slavery fiction and slave narrative authors as sustaining rival political geographies and providing broader insights into gendered infrapolitics. Women, white and black, moreover, served as political influencers and sectional mediators. To achieve 'a new level of visibility,' Varon urges historians to 'define politics broadly' and to reckon with the 'stunning range of women's public activism, but also their private agonies and triumphs' (p. 19). Stacey Robertson concurs. She characterises northern white and African American women's involvement in pre-war politics as a 'pot-holed process' (p. 24). Abolitionist women supported the Whig, Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican parties. Jessie Frémont, for instance, successfully empowered and mobilized white women. Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins and other African American women also participated in political debates. Indeed, Robertson concludes that these women had a more decisive role in the defense of John Brown and his raid on Harper's Ferry than did their white counterparts.

In part two, Lisa Tendrich Frank's thoughtful essay shows how wartime mobilisation affected all southern women's choices, attitudes, and experiences. The pressures of the Confederate nation strained white women's households while simultaneously offering new opportunities for enslaved women. From empowerment to resentment, Frank persuasively shows how southern women developed an array of strategies to cope with the wartime state. Similarly, northern mobilization afforded new opportunities in supporting soldiers, governments and households according to Jessica Ziparo. Ziparo concludes that, by reaffirming both racial and gender subordination, wartime mobilization forced northern women to navigate life in a patriotic society.

The essays of Rebecca Capobianco and Chandra Manning describe the countering regional understandings of emancipation. For Capobianco, the intersecting role of race, gender, and place are clear for southern women. Emancipation and the real loss of enslaved property challenged Betty Maury, Kate Stone, and other white women financially, socially, psychologically. In contrast, emancipation emboldened African-American women. They redefined the power dynamics, leveraged new freedoms and concessions from their enslavers, and bided their time. The unfolding emancipation process had lasting consequences. Manning explores how northern women, white and black, provided both material relief and a 'human presence' in the occupied areas (p. 106). She concludes that women who travelled south encountered failure and disillusionment. The extent to which failure was shared equally and widely among white and black northern women remains unclear. While the remaining essays, and work by other scholars of African-American women's history, suggest otherwise, future research might bring both precision and clarification to Manning's provocative conclusions.

The next three sections, respectively, show the effects of the war in changing gender roles; the persistence of gendered and class-based discrimination; and the material consequences of war for women remaining at the homefront. Libra Hilde concludes that, due to a 'sense of ownership' over soldiers and the Confederate homefront, women viewed themselves to be veterans of the wartime relief efforts (p. 127). These claims extended to African-American women, specifically nurses. In this regard, white women did not hold a monopoly. Race and class sharply defined northern experiences; gender issues exacerbated by war marginalised African-American women's contributions. Northern women proved incapable to working across racial lines in a shared struggle to provide for the northern homefront. According to Jeanie Attie, racism and persisting discrimination facilitated the development of separate relief efforts. While it is not fully addressed by Attie, these segregated spaces would continue to offer northern black women dignity, leadership opportunities, and the ability to advance notions of freedom and citizenship without ridicule. If the legacy of the gender crisis of war continued into the post-war era, as is suggested by Attie at the end of the essay, then these segregated free spaces continued to remain important for black women involved in racial uplift efforts and in actualising the Civil War's meaning in their post-war lives.

In terms of households, Jacqueline Glass Campbell's and Nicole Etcheson's essays offer fresh perspectives on the overlapping roles of race and gender. The former reveals the ways in which war disrupted southern women's identity within their families and contributed to dislocation, trauma, and the shattering of pro-slavery myths when 'African Americans became the enemy' (p. 178). Black and white women, however, experienced the shared consequences of the 'devastated home front' wrought by Sherman's campaign (p. 183). Etcheson demonstrates African-American women's inability to fit traditional gender expectations as white women. She neither pays lip service nor minimises African-American women's experiences by suggesting they were the same as Rachel Cormany and other white women. Rather, she engages with the overlapping effects of race and gender as contributing to black women's suffering. These combined effects undergirded Charity Townsend's public fight for USCT pensions, as well as guiding the efforts of Emilie Davis to document her experiences without mediation. Irrespective of race, Etcheson persuasively concludes that one's class, connections to men, and particular life stage, profoundly influenced northern women and their households.

The Civil War also influenced divergent religious understandings. W. Scott Poole illustrates that religious

apocalyptic understanding of emancipation and freedom made freedwomen both the subject and symbol of white women's religious ideas at the expense of their own and even African-American women's conceptions of 'apocalyptic liberation' (p. 221). While white women cemented Lost Cause ideology, black women sang a 'language of deliverance'. Employing the African-American church, they actualised the promise of emancipation through racial uplift activism. For abolitionist women, race informed their understanding of millennialism and emancipation. Timothy Wesley contends that 'female emancipationists awaited the end of slavery in America as part of an assumed preordained progression toward the perfection of mankind and the millennial kingdom.' He convincingly shows how white and black northern women's prophetic Christian beliefs were influenced by the ferocity of their expressions in comparison to those of their male counterparts. Overcoming racial and class divides, their faith united them in the conviction that the 'Almighty would soon sanction ... the eradication of slavery' (p. 235). While northern women 'acted out compassion for the victims of slavery', their religiosity never created a singular understanding of African-American freedom to include true social and political equality in the post-emancipation society nor framed the role of federal government in the post-emancipation process (p. 237). African-American anti-slavery religious adherents ultimately proved more vocal and fervent in their praise of the Emancipation Proclamation than their white counterparts.

The essays of parts seven and eight move forward chronologically into the Reconstruction era and post-war remembrances. These concluding sections allow for an assessment regarding the transformative nature of the war for women in the post-war nation. Using New Orleans as her case study, Elizabeth Parish Smith contends that the Civil War radically transformed women's experiences in the legal system. The Reconstruction-era New Orleans courts empowered women, specifically African-American women, to construct households, control their wages, and determine their labour opportunities. When challenged, both white and black women turned to the courts and achieved 'remarkably color-blind verdicts' therein (p. 270). These legal transformations produced a violent backlash. Yet, Parish Smith concludes, 'the commonalities that were possible for women across race during this period help us to recognize the radical potential that existed, if too briefly and too precariously, to reconstruct a very different South' (p. 274). In contrast, Faye Dudden offers a more conservative understanding. For 'white women's rights activists,' Dudden argues, 'like the North in general, never saw the postemancipation South clearly because they looked at it in part through the distorting lens of the mainstream press' (p. 281). Connecting her essay with Manning's provocative piece, Dudden illustrates how white women had access to 'direct, unfiltered news' from those engaged in freedmen's aid work (p. 281). But, these reports 'could hardly do justice to a complex picture' (p. 283). Moreover, the media coverage actually deepened conflict with its partisan coverage over women's suffrage agitation, promotion of the black male rapist myths, and spread of inaccurate discussions of Reconstruction effects across southern communities. Northern white women, including activists and reformers, continued to deny the real racial conditions, expressed a lack of concern over the post-emancipation South, and, therefore, stymied the possibility of developing a cohesive strategy for advancing women's suffrage and other socio-political rights. Neither the African-American press nor alternative white press outlets could adequately respond to the fake news. Dudden astutely concludes that white northern women's embrace of distorted media coverage did considerable harm to both the southern freedmen's aid movement and the women's suffrage movement.

As shown in the final thematic section, racism also shaped southern memorial work and experiences within the Grand Army of the Republic's Woman's Relief Corps. Both Micki McElya and Wendy Hamand Venet show the purposeful exclusion of African American women, the development of separate racial understandings of the meaning of the Civil War, and the consequences for contemporary discussions over the contested memorial landscape, defined by whiteness. Employing the persistent erasure of African-American women as her point of entry, McElya shows how the early Kentucky commemorations reflected the national impulse, promoting reconciliation among white northerners and southerners at the expense of African Americans. Following the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, activists reinserted the complex histories and African-American collective memories into the commemorative landscape, as evidenced by the University of Louisville's Freedom Park and the Kentucky African American Civil War Memorial. These

early 21st-century efforts added some balance to the commemorative landscape, but also demonstrated the persistent role of Civil War sites in the ‘racial and gendered struggles for cultural and political representation’ (p. 316). Similarly, Venet reveals, white northern women forged a gendered and racial struggle for Civil War memory that rejected a sisterhood with African-American members of the Woman’s Relief Corps. They also rejected the national reconciliation impulse and made little effort to participate in the Blue and Gray veteran reunions. Yet, they, like their southern white women counterparts, maintained an active public role in the fight for pensions, veteran’s care, and the crafting of histories that accurately detailed their experiences. Collectively, these closing essays highlight the need for future research on African-American women’s struggles to commemorate the Civil War, prevent the erasure of African-American military contributions, and engage in the memory work essential for sustaining a counter-memory during Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. Without such research, it will remain impossible to fully appreciate how post-Civil Rights Movement activists could successfully marshal memory within the contemporary culture wars over the Civil War landscape, as discussed by McElvy, and how black women sustained a counter-memory without the assistance of the Women’s Relief Corps into the 20th and 21st centuries, as suggested by Venet.

Overall, the anthology successfully uncovers the diverse experiences of northern and southern women during the Civil War era. The rigid north-south paradigm, however, ignores women living in the American West and their own varied experiences. While claiming an intersectional approach, the anthology's essays do not consistently explore the experiences of African-American women. Some essays rely on known African Americans and unevenly place them in conversation with other women while, in others, the discussion of African-American women feels forced in comparison to the more nuanced discussions of their white counterparts. Notwithstanding, this anthology is suitable for Civil War era scholars, graduate students, and undergraduates. Although ‘much remains to be done’, Giesberg and Miller have produced a work that opens up space for future inquiry (p. xviii). Indeed, the editors and the stellar group of essay contributors reveal that the eventual upending of Glymph’s original assessment and the realisation of an inclusive scholarly understanding of Civil War-era women is on the horizon.

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