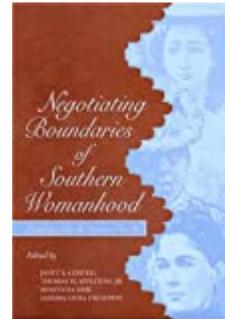




Janet L. Coryell Treadway, Thomas H. Appleton Jr., Anastatia Sims, Sandra Gioia, eds. *Negotiating Boundaries of Southern Womanhood: Dealing with the Powers That Be*. Southern Women Series. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000. 233 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1295-5.



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Making the Invisible Visible

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Ever since Anne Firor Scott adopted the title “making the invisible woman visible” for her 1984 survey of southern women’s history, historians of southern women have sought not only to infuse women’s agency into the narratives of southern history, but also to redefine the parameters of that history by questioning definitions of political power, class identity and agency, and racial ideology. The eleven essays in *Negotiating Boundaries of Southern Womanhood* do just that as they examine women who “confronted, cooperated with, and sometimes were co-opted by” existing power structures (p. 2).

Drawn from the Fourth Annual Conference of the Southern Association of Women Historians, the work of these young scholars vibrantly reflects the diversity and complexity of female experience in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century South.[1] These essays are not arranged chronologically, nor grouped by methodology, race, or region. Perhaps like southern women’s history itself, this random ordering across time, space, class, and race highlights the interconnectedness of southern women’s experience. *Negotiating Boundaries* is a must

read for all those interested in the South, women’s experience, or race and class dynamics.

Beginning with the antebellum South, five essays highlight the struggles with “the powers that be” of particularly marginalized women. The efforts of free women of color to negotiate labor and hierarchy find careful chroniclers in Beverly Greene Bond, “The Extent of the Law: Free Women of Color in Antebellum Memphis,” and Diane Batts Morrow, “Our Convent: the Oblate Sisters of Providence.” Bond gives definition to the small network of African American women, either born free or recently emancipated, who labored to support themselves and their families on the margins on white society in antebellum Memphis. Ties of “intermarriage, residency, and friendship” connected free women of color to prominent white families (p. 25). Her actors vibrate with agency, negotiating the boundaries of power with skill, diplomacy, and tenacity. Professor Morrow’s Providence Oblate Sisters represent the oldest permanent female order of African descent in the country, dating from 1828. They not only negotiated their way through the church’s male hierarchy and the rivalries within Balti-

more's African American community, but they also used traditional gender ideology to enlarge their realm of service to the poor.

Though privileged by race, unmarried white women in the antebellum South also contested their marginalization. Kirsten Wood examines lives of slaveholding widows and their families in the Old Southeast in "The Strongest Ties That Bind Poor Mortals Together." She finds that widows submitted to the advice of male kin, manipulated "ideals of familial relationships in order to demand help, justify their conduct, and critique their kin," and thus to some extent, challenged their powerlessness as unmarried women (p. 155).

In a similar vein, Christine Jacobson Carter studies the familial expectations of women who did not marry in "Indispensable Spinsters: Maiden Aunts in the Elite Families of Savannah and Charleston." Carter struggles to find agency in women who were expected to serve their family, yet were denied the respect and honor accorded southern wives and mothers. More successful in challenging male prerogatives are the Texas women in Angela Boswell's "Married Women's Property Rights and the Challenge to the Patriarchal Order." Although her study is based on only one county, Boswell discovers numerous examples of laws granting women legal powers, not as a challenge to their husbands' authority, but for the practical conduct of business, thus moving these married women directly into the public and financial sphere.

Three essays examine women's lives during the Civil War. "Cartridge Makers and Myrmidon Viragos" by E. Susan Barber draws from an extensive study of female labor in Confederate Richmond in order to contrast the public perception of two quite different groups of women. While the forty-three girls and women who were killed in a munitions plant explosion in 1863 were heralded as "war heroes," the public heaped derision on a group of women from the same working-class neighborhood who marched on the business district with axes and sticks to protest the food shortages in Richmond.

Another Virginia Confederate, Mary Geenhow Lee, is profiled by Sheila Rae Phipps in a creative analysis of the function of the "social call" and social "connexions" with others as vehicles for ascribing social status during the disruptions of war time. In "Their Desire to Visit the Southerners," Phipps creatively deconstructs Mary Lee's use of a female rite to make political statements and to wield social power.

Moving beyond the War, Michelle A. Krowl's es-

say traces the advocacy of African American women who sought widow's pensions in post-war Virginia in "Her Just Dues: Civil War Pensions of African American Women in Virginia." Because widows first had to document their pre-war marriage to a soldier in order to qualify for their "just due" as pensioners, Krowl shows the inventiveness and tenacity of African American petitioners. She argues that "black women understood the aspect of entitlement that underlay an application," (p. 55) and thus they entered the political landscape and battled federal pension bureaucrats for financial support. Because "the specifics of respectability remained contested," (p. 69) and their prewar marriages as slaves were not legally recognized, these women found themselves defending their personal morality even as they tried to prove they had been legitimate marital partners of soldiers. As does Bond in her essay on free women of color in Memphis, Krowl make impressive use of census data, federal records, and local court proceedings to bring to light "invisible" actors.

Essays set in the post-war South include Antoinette G. Van Zelm's examination of women's redefinition of citizenship in two groups of Virginia women who memorialized the past by creating public ceremonies. African American women played critical roles in establishing important community celebrations around Emancipation Day, even though their roles became less visible as the decades passed. White Virginia women used their active support of the Lost Cause, fund-raising for various memorial associations, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy to establish a public presence. Van Zelm concludes that [W]omen of both races affirmed their communal identities. . . .and created new patterns of civic life" (p. 88).

Ruth Montgomery also uses women's role in the Lost Cause to brilliantly question race and class in the shaping of a southern progressive reform agenda. Her essay "Lost Cause Mythology in New South Reform" uses Georgia sources to trace the strategies of women reformers. Whether the reforms were child labor, prohibition, compulsory education, or improved agricultural methods, these women usually cast their advocacy in terms of rehabilitating the South's "character" in the eyes of the rest of the nation. Meanwhile, reformers sought to protect the "southern way of life" with all its assumptions of white superiority and class "elevation," even as they advocated social improvements. Like other scholars working the field of "citizenship," Montgomery reminds us that "significant political movement occurs outside the realm of partisan politics" (p. 198).

Elite African American women also reflected an acute awareness of class and color according to Kibibi Voloria Mack-Shelton's essay, "The Elite African American Women of Orangeburg, South Carolina: Class, Work, and Disunity," which is based principally on oral histories. Active in the state federation of Colored Women's Clubs, these women also formed other invitation-only organizations and did not socialize with working-class or other middle-class African American women. Although Mack-Shelton finds some uplift activities among these Orangeburg elites, her conviction that women of color observed strict color lines challenges scholarly convictions of African American sisterhood on behalf of racial uplift.

The triennial SAWH Conference has become a testing ground for innovative research and stimulating conversations about southern women. The eleven essays of this collection embody the vigorous scholarship afoot in

southern women's history and reveal the persistence and ingenuity that southern women showed in "dealing with the powers that be."

[1]. Previous collections from SAWH triennial conferences, all published by the University of Missouri Press, include Virginia Bernhard, et. al., eds., *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (1992); Virginia Bernhard, et. al., eds., *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South* (1994); Janet L. Coryell, et. al., eds., *Beyond Image and Convention: Explorations in Southern Women's History* (1998).

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