

A COMPANION TO AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

Edited by

Nancy A. Hewitt



A Companion to American Women's History

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To the graduate students who have taught me so much.

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Introduction

NANCY A. HEWITT

WORK on the history of American¹ women has exploded in recent years, building on and challenging the interpretations and frameworks first developed in the 1960s and 1970s. From the emergence of American women's history as a field, scholars explored the diverse experiences of women. Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood" (1966) was joined by Anne Firor Scott's *Southern Lady* (1970), Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America* (1972), and Thomas Dublin's *Women at Work* (1979) as hallmarks of the first generation of scholarship.² Not until the decade from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s did studies of white, middle-class women in the northeastern United States come to dominate the landscape. During that period, this single group of women not only received the bulk of scholarly attention, but in addition interpretations based on their lives came to govern scholarship in the field as a whole.

Still, there was no single approach to American women's history. Some scholars focused on prescriptive literature and the way popular discourses reflected and/or shaped behavior; others emphasized material conditions and the way the market economy and industrial capitalism transformed women's lives. A few examined how the breadth and instability of the emergent "middle class" created divisions among white bourgeois women in the early to mid-nineteenth century. These studies, pioneered by Mary Ryan in *The Cradle of the Middle Class* in 1981, highlighted the common concerns of women and men who shared socioeconomic circumstances and kinship ties. This approach challenged more frequent claims that separate sexual spheres distanced women from men experientially as well as rhetorically. Other scholars, most notably Linda Gordon in *Woman's Body, Woman's Rights* (1976), traced ideological differences among women that shaped both the private lives of ordinary women and the public agendas of the far smaller number who participated in movements for social change. Moreover, even amid the outpouring of work on white, middle-class northeastern women, historians continued to pursue studies of working-class, immigrant, African American, southern, and western women.

By the late 1980s, a major transformation in American women's history occurred as the exploration of differences among women took center stage. Research on class, race, ethnicity, and region poured off the presses and exploded into visibility at

conferences and in classrooms. Pathbreaking studies such as Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985) and Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985); Joanne Meyerowitz's *Women Adrift* (1988) and Christine Stansell's *City of Women* (1986); Susan Glenn's *Daughters of the Shtetl* (1990) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn's *Issei, Nissei, War Bride* (1986); Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson's *The Women's West* (1987) and Sarah Deutsch's *No Separate Refuge* (1987); and Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress* (1987) and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's *Revolt Against Chivalry* (1979) demonstrated vast differences in women's experiences. At conferences and panel discussions as well as in published works, the debate moved from differences and struggles between women and men to hierarchies and power dynamics among women.

The disagreements among women's historians were intense and often painful in this period, but they illustrated the field's growth and vitality. They also inspired provocative new work that used detailed explorations of particular women's experiences to challenge existing interpretations. For example, in "Womanist Consciousness" (1989b), Elsa Barkley Brown wielded a case study of Maggie Lena Walker, a leader in Richmond, Virginia's African American community, to critique concepts of identity and politics derived from white women's experience. Similarly, "Disorderly Women" (1986), Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's investigation of a textile workers' strike in Elizabethton, Tennessee, employed an elegantly crafted local study to question class and regional assumptions about sexuality and modernity.

Throughout this period, the study of specific communities in which the experiences of ordinary women could be studied in fine detail vied with those exploring national associations, movements, and developments. The analysis of social movements, in particular, required both perspectives to explain how change occurred. Yet rarely did scholars combine the two approaches. For the most part, historians of national movements developed general arguments regarding women's efforts on behalf of a cause, while those who pursued local studies used their findings to complicate and challenge that national portrait. For example, in "The Domestication of Politics" (1984), Paula Baker argued that the passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment granting woman suffrage was a critical turning point because it eliminated the common ground of disfranchisement that had so long formed the centerpiece of a distinct women's political culture. In contrast, studies of political activism among African American women in Richmond, Virginia, immigrant women workers in Tampa, Florida, and female Populists in Kansas, all focused on the late nineteenth century, suggested that women's political culture was deeply fractured (or delightfully diverse) decades earlier. Only recently have scholars like Sarah Barringer Gordon and Gayle Gullet – examining the intersection of debates over suffrage and polygamy and the statewide campaign for women's votes in California, respectively – begun to address the interplay of local, state, and national developments.

As studies that focused on the intersection of local, regional, and national developments began to emerge in the 1990s, those that recognized the intertwined character of "separate" spheres multiplied rapidly. Starting in the 1980s, a number of historians traced the ways that women's public and private activities shaped each other. In *A Midwife's Tale* (1990), Laurel Thatcher Ulrich drew a compelling portrait of the life

of eighteenth-century Maine midwife Martha Ballard, demonstrating her critical role not only in the intimate dramas of labor and birth but also in the community-wide exchange of goods and services and the politically charged rituals of trial and judgment. For the nineteenth century, Jeanne Boydston detailed the ways that the most mundane domestic labors contributed to the rise of a market economy and industrial capitalism. And Elaine Tyler May explored the discourse of Soviet containment in the post-World War II period to illuminate the connections between fears of Communism in the arena of national politics and the ideal of the happy homemaker in the domestic realm.

The debates among American women's historians over issues of race, class, and region; local and national perspectives; and private and public spheres unfolded in the midst of larger theoretical controversies among feminist scholars over concepts and categories. Conflicts over the meaning and significance of "experience" and "identity" were especially heated. Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis" (1986) became the most-cited reference of the new postmodernist position which challenged the existence of experiences or identities unmediated by language and critiqued grand narratives and fixed identities as largely created, rather than recovered, by scholars. The battle that raged over what we could know and how we could know it engaged a wide array of scholars, but it had a particular intensity for those in emerging fields – African American history and labor history as well as women's history – who were concerned that postmodern challenges to fixed identities and grand narratives would subvert the power of their work just as it was beginning to receive serious attention. It now seems clear, however, that the postmodernist turn has opened up new possibilities for analyzing women's past, including more critical readings of a variety of texts and richer understandings of the multiple and contested identities embraced by individuals and groups. At the same time, it has not diminished the power of other, often more materially based, approaches to the field.

The history of sexuality offers a particularly important example of the ways that modern and postmodern perspectives have contributed simultaneously to scholarship on American women. Early work in this area focused on the experiences and identities of lesbians or the issues surrounding contraception and abortion, that is, on areas defined as outside normative heterosexuality. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman's *Intimate Matters* (1988) and Leslie Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime* (1997) provide superb examples of how such an approach recast understandings of women's history. Although neither of these studies adopted postmodernist perspectives, both included readings of popular, medical, and legal discourse in their analyses. The development of queer theory, which employed postmodernist perspectives to reconceptualize sexuality and its relation to race, gender, and performance, created alternate narratives. Such recent studies as Siobhan Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* (2000) and Lisa Duggan's *Sapphic Slashers* (2000) highlight the power of work that conceives of sexuality as continually constructed (and reconstructed) and interrogates its relation to discourses of race, violence, and power in particular historical contexts.

One consequence of the debates over postmodernism and the work on sexuality has been increased attention to gender within the context of women's history.

Gender was a critical concern of women's historians from the founding of the field. Joan Kelly's 1976 essay, "The Social Relations of the Sexes," argued that women's circumstances and experiences must be understood in relation to those of men, analyzing both their distinctive and shared histories. Her 1977 essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" provided a compelling example of how such comparisons not only illuminated previously hidden aspects of a period, but recast what was already familiar. Although many scholars agreed, it was not until the 1990s that a significant number of American women's historians began framing analyses in terms of gender and analyzing manhood and masculinity as well as womanhood and femininity. A relatively recent development, gender analyses such as Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* (1995) and George Chauncey's *Gay New York* (1994) have received widespread acclaim and have once again expanded the frameworks of the field.

Perhaps the greatest strength of American women's history, and women's history more generally, has come from the field's ability to take advantage of new approaches, concepts, and theoretical perspectives without abandoning those that came before. Certainly serious debates and disagreements remain among women's historians. In many cases, they are the lifeblood of the field, nurturing new and important work on a vast range of topics from a wide variety of perspectives. Journals, conferences, monograph series, doctoral programs, undergraduate and graduate courses, historic sites, documentaries, museum exhibits, oral history projects, workshops, seminars, and websites – all devoted to women's history and many focused on American women's history – multiply each year. African American women's history, southern and western women's history, Jewish women's history, working-class women's history, and lesbian/queer/transgender history have developed as critical areas of study that are sufficiently large to be considered distinct entities, building upon and transforming American women's history as a whole.

As this book goes to press, the scope and definition of American women's history is again being recast. Attention to the politics and influence of conservative women is gaining increased attention. This is not surprising given the conservative resurgence in American politics from the 1980s on. It has become more and more difficult to ignore the power of women who opposed suffrage and social welfare programs, such as the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, or to consider them as mere pawns of male politicians or clerical authorities. Women who joined the Ku Klux Klan and other nativist and racist organizations or who spoke out in favor of increased military spending in the 1920s or those who rallied against racial integration and led anti-abortion campaigns in the post-World War II era were as much activists as those who initiated and supported progressive causes. In addition, the rhetoric of conservative and right-wing movements often wielded tropes of gender, sexuality, and race as an important means of provoking fear and maintaining the status quo. No longer can women's historians interpret the history of progressive social activism without viewing it in relation to conservative and right-wing opponents of change.

At the same time, work on colonial and postcolonial societies around the world, on imperialism, and on the Americas and the Black Atlantic has challenged scholars of the United States to move away from an insular view of their past. Those who study

colonial North America have always had to be attentive to a wider world. Yet even they are being pushed to expand their vision beyond the thirteen Atlantic coast colonies and consider issues of conquest and contact across the continent as a whole, recognizing that for many Americans, the colonial era extended deep into the nineteenth century. Indeed, some would now argue that it converged in the 1890s with the United States' first imperial ventures. Women's historians exploring the American West, on the one hand, and American colonial and imperial relations, on the other, have been in the forefront of work that recasts questions and categories of race, gender, and sexuality, and demands attention to a wider array of sources. These include materials in a variety of languages, such as Spanish, French, Russian, and various Native American languages, as well as rituals, photographs, and other artifacts of cultural contact, conflict, and conquest. These initiatives, fueled by the rising tide of globalization in the twenty-first century, assure that American women's history will continue to develop in new and intriguing directions.

This volume in the Blackwell series represents the wide range of American women's histories appearing at the beginning of the twenty-first century while reminding readers of the critical work produced over the past four decades. They address the debates outlined above in the context of specific topics and time periods and introduce as well those most immediate to a particular subject. The chapters are divided chronologically into three sections – colonial, 1760–1880, and 1880–1990. Within each of these sections, essays are arranged thematically, covering areas such as activism, work, family, religion, war, and popular culture that have received significant attention from American women's historians over an extended period. There are not, in general, separate essays on African American, Indian, immigrant, or working-class women. Instead, authors have integrated work on diverse communities of women into their analyses of particular topics, from colonial contact to marriage and property to consumption. Thus African American women appear, for instance, not only in essays on “Slavery and the Slave Trade” and “Civil Rights and Black Liberation,” but also in those on “Education and the Professions” and “Urban Spaces and Popular Cultures.” A few articles, covering areas where the research is especially rich, are regionally specific, including “Conflicts and Cultures in the West” and “Gender and Class Formations in the Antebellum North.” But other topics that are often treated in regional terms – North vs. South or urban vs. rural – such as “The Civil War Era” and “Consumer Cultures,” address issues across these conventional divides.

This volume is intended to be expansive but not comprehensive, introductory rather than definitive. Given the voluminous work in the field and the extraordinary amount published every year, authors were asked to provide interpretive essays that addressed what they considered to be the major issues in a particular area of research. Other topics and other interpretive approaches could certainly have been included, but these essays, individually and collectively, illuminate a vast landscape and provide entry to a range of other narratives and arguments. The bibliography at the end of each chapter is supplemented by a more extensive listing of works at the end of the volume. In both, citations to books and articles in fields outside American women's

history are included where authors consider them especially important to their argument. Such references are thus eclectic, but they provide a window into the ways that American women's history was constituted and continues to develop as part of the wider world of women's history, American history, and women's studies scholarship. So, too, references to dissertations are included only when individual authors chose to cite them. Here again, however, even these limited references to new work in the field provide a glimpse of future directions. The books and articles cited in the volume are by no means exhaustive, but they will lead readers to a large number of significant works, and attention to footnotes and bibliographies in these as well as to other works published by the presses and journals cited herein, will open up an even more vast terrain. Because of its size, in most cases, the bibliography at the end of the volume lists only anthologies (rather than the individual articles in them), since most contain a number of essays relevant to American women's history. It also focuses primarily on secondary sources and readily accessible printed primary sources.

American women's history, like women's history in general, is a work in progress. With this *Companion* we seek both to provide a sense of the incredible progress already made in the field and to inspire further work. The effort to capture American women's history in a single volume at a particular moment has been daunting. Given the vitality of the field, authors continued to revise essays and add citations until I had to beg them to send their "final" version. My conceptualization of topics and chapters did not always mesh with those of the authors who wrote the essays, which necessitated a continual rearrangement of chapters and of my own thinking about the volume. This has been a tremendous learning experience for me, mostly positive. I could not have survived it, however, without the enthusiastic support and goodwill of Susan Rabinowitz and Kenneth Provencher at Blackwell, and the attention and expertise of Brigitte Lee, who oversaw the production process. I am deeply grateful as well to the authors whose essays appear here. They all took time away from important research of their own to grapple with that of others. April de Stefano, who compiled the massive bibliography at the end of this volume, offered far more than technical assistance, although she offered that as well. Her vision of American women's history, so different and yet so connected to my own, reminded me time and again of why this volume was important; and her good humor and sharp wit helped me over many a hurdle. Steven Lawson not only provided an essay for this volume at a critical moment, but he also suffered through all the anxieties and frustrations that attended the project as a whole. His support of my editorial efforts made the completion of this volume possible, and his willingness to recast his own work through the lens of women's history reminded me of the power of this field to transform history as a whole. Finally, the graduate students with whom I have worked, especially those at the University of South Florida, Duke University, and Rutgers University, have been a constant source of inspiration and insight. In company with their counterparts in programs across the country and increasingly throughout the world, they are transforming the agenda of American women's history. I dedicate this volume to them.

NOTES

- 1 American is used here in its narrow sense to denote the United States and the territories that came to comprise it. Although there is some attention, particularly in the colonial period, to areas of North America that remained outside the United States, there is no attempt to systematically include work on women in other parts of the continent or the hemisphere.
- 2 Full citations to works cited in this introduction are in the bibliography at the end of this volume.

PART I

The Colonial Era, 1600–1760

CHAPTER ONE

The Imperial Gaze: Native American, African American, and Colonial Women in European Eyes

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ALGONQUIAN women in New England, wrote William Wood in 1634, were “more loving, pitiful, and modest, mild, provident, and laborious than their lazy husbands.” Wood imagined that oppressed Indian women would gladly embrace European gender roles with their presumably lighter burdens of female domesticity. Commenting in 1657 on enslaved African women in Barbados, Richard Ligon remarked that their breasts “hang down below their Navals,” and “when they stoop at their common work of weeding, they hang almost to the ground, that at a distance you would think they had six legs.” Ligon’s vision of nearly deformed African women supported his belief that they, like beasts, were fit for grueling labor. Pennsylvania was a healthy place, one promotional tract claimed in 1698, in which transplanted English women proved remarkably fertile: “Barrenness among women [is] hardly to be heard of,” and “seldom any young Married Woman but hath a Child in her Belly, or one upon her Lap.” Colonial women who settled there would be as fruitful as the land. Written in three different places at different times, these descriptions did not simply mirror their subjects. Rather, images of women were part of complex and often contradictory efforts by colonizers to understand and control intercultural contact in the “New World.” (Wood cited in Smits 1982: 293; Ligon cited in Morgan 1997: 168; Pennsylvania tract cited in Klepp 1998: 919.)

How did Europeans’ perceptions of Native American, African, and European women influence the project of settlement and expansion in colonial America? Historians have begun to mine well-known writings of European explorers and settlers in search of something often previously overlooked: representations of women and the role these images played in colonizers’ perceptions and practices of conquest. The “linguistic turn” in academia in the 1980s and 1990s, with its attention to language as an aspect of power relations rather than as a transparent and neutral means of communication,

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encouraged the interrogation of primary sources as suspect informants. Along with anthropologists and literary critics, historians have come to understand verbal descriptions as embedded in and constitutive of (rather than apart from and simply descriptive of) social relations between different groups. The critical reassessment of historical sources has in turn boosted research on the perceptions of colonial writers, the cultural predispositions of their “gaze,” and the sometimes fantastic images they projected of the would-be colonized. As a result, some historians have focused on the way colonizers deployed images of women in an effort to promote and justify colonial conquest. This line of inquiry is still relatively new, and some of the most relevant scholarship to combine analyses of gender, imperialism, and imagery of colonized women is based on literary analysis or on historical and anthropological examinations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial contexts. This essay, however, focuses on perceptions of women in or migrating to British North America to explore what power relations underlay colonizers’ descriptions of “other” women, and the role that particular images of women played in the process of colonization.

Representations of Native American Women

Many English readers first encountered “America” in the form of an allegory. By the 1570s, America appeared in numerous European books and maps as an Indian woman wearing only a feathered headdress. In the famous engraving of “America” by Theodor Galle, for example (ca. 1580 after a drawing by Jan van der Straet), America appears as a native woman on a hammock, aroused from her slumber by Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian explorer whose name, in feminine form, would become attached to the continents of the western hemisphere (see plate 1). The conquistador, fully clad and armed, plants his banner into the ground with the same firm assertion with which he will stake claim to the region and the people in it. As Louis Montrose explains, the representation of America as a semi-nude and reclining woman does much to naturalize the conquest as part of the predictable relations of men to women and of civilized people to “savages.” In images such as these, the “New World” is gendered female, and its exploration and conquest is made sexual. The land, like the women in it, is depicted as there for the taking, available to any male colonist intrepid enough to grasp the prize. The scene of cannibalism in the background renders America savage (despite the figure’s idealized European looks), suggesting that the pending conquest will banish savagery at the same time that it appropriates both the female figure and the land she represents.

Similarly, as Annette Kolodny has shown, Europeans commonly described the country’s physical terrain in gendered terms that conveyed the appropriateness of its annexation. Descriptions of a “virgin land,” one untouched by human agency and awaiting its own awakening (and profitable exploitation), did much to erase symbolically the presence of Indians whose agricultural practices and routine forest burnings had long marked the countryside. Portrayals of a sparsely inhabited and entirely “unimproved” land falsely suggested that only small numbers of nomadic Indians roamed the area with merely spurious claims to the region. The descriptions of a land lying in wait, its riches as yet unexplored because Indian men were incapable of the



Plate 1 America. Engraving (ca. 1580) by Theodor Galle after a drawing by Jan van der Straet (ca. 1575). Courtesy of the Burndy Library, Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

deed, served as a sexual metaphor that appealed to European men. William Strachey, for example, argued that the English could much better exploit “those benefits . . . which god hath given unto them [Indian men], but evolved and hid in the bowells and womb of their Land (to them barren, and unprofitable, because unknowne)” (cited in Brown 1996: 57). Sir Walter Raleigh went so far as to describe Guiana as “a country that hath yet her maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not bene torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance . . . It hath never bene entred by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any Christian prince” (Montrose 1992: 154). Anne McClintock uses the term “porno-tropics” to describe the “long tradition of male travel as an erotics of ravishment.” For centuries, European travel accounts “libidinally eroticized” Africa, the Americas, and Asia as places of male conquest (McClintock 1995: 22). The comments by Strachey and Raleigh can stand in for countless examples that illustrate the point made by Joan C. Scott that forms of social inequality may be modeled on gendered relations of power, whether or not these social relations expressly involve men and women. Justifications of conquest that depicted the land and its indigenous inhabitants as passive and submissive (and hence

feminized) implied that colonial relations of domination were as natural, obvious, and appropriate as Europeans presumed hierarchical gender relations to be. Acts of conquest framed in gendered terms served to naturalize relations of power, with Indian peoples and their environment portrayed as the feminized “Other.”

Peter Hulme notes, however, that on occasion the feminization could be strategically reversed, as in Samuel Purchas’s 1625 account of the Indian massacre of Virginia colonists in 1622: “But when Virginia was violently ravished by her owne ruder Natives, yea, her Virgin cheeks dyed with the bloud of three Colonies . . . the stupid Earth seems distempered with such bloody potions and cries that shee is ready to spue out her Inhabitants” (Hulme 1986: 160). In this case, the “virgin” land was raped by its own natives, and the spilt blood was that of the colonies, which are, in the process, identified with the ravaged land. The colonists have become the natural residents, the passive victims of native violence, while the Indians are spewed out. Gendered relations of colonialism could appear in different forms, but they routinely served to justify the use of colonial force (in this case, as retaliation) against the Indians.

As part of the eroticization of conquest, native women often appeared as figures of deviant and excessive sexuality. Amerigo Vespucci, for example, described a “shameful” custom in which Indian women, “being very libidinous, make the penis of their husbands swell to such a size as to appear deformed.” The women accomplish this with the bite of a poisonous snake, he said, though as a result many husbands “lose their virile organs and remain eunuchs” (Montrose 1992: 144). The inversion of a European gender hierarchy, apparent in the image of depraved and sexually violent Indian women and of men willing to tolerate emasculation for the pleasure of their wives, again signaled the “savagery” that to Europeans made moot any native claims to the land and its resources.

Vespucci’s account sounds entirely fabricated, but actual gender roles and sexual mores astonished European newcomers and fueled perceptions of Indian incivility. As Kathleen Brown explains, ethnic identities stemmed in part from “the confrontations of culturally-specific manhoods and womanhoods” (Brown 1995: 27). Many Native American groups, for example, provided visitors with female bedfellows. Women mediators offered not only sexual companionship but also rudimentary language skills and lessons in local customs that facilitated trade relations. Because these arrangements served an overtly diplomatic function, Indian leaders debated the merits of such associations before giving their assent. By contrast, European norms defined only marital sex as acceptable for women. Although women often transgressed sexual rules and Europeans in fact accommodated premarital and extramarital sex to a considerable degree, prescriptive mores defined women’s nonmarital sexual activity as profligacy. Some Europeans imputed to sexually available Indian women a mercenary nature; others described them as innocents in a precivilized Eden. Whether perceived as calculating or naive, Indian women’s sexual relations with outsiders appeared to Europeans as acts of blatant promiscuity. Colonial perceptions of sexual “deviance” contributed to a rhetoric of rightful dispossession: if civilized women were chaste, then lascivious Indian women (and tolerant native men) further proved that Indians in general (often lumped together in European minds) were “uncivilized” and therefore without legitimate claim to the land.

Despite the derisive tone in many accounts of Indian women, a great deal of admiration also infused colonial depictions of their bodies and behavior. Women were described not only as promiscuous creatures, but as gorgeous ones as well, thus “eroticizing the middle ground” between European men and Indian women (Godbeer 1999). Margarita Zamora notes that “eroticization of the feminine implies *both* desire and disdain,” and she explains that in the context of a European gender hierarchy, Indian women could be idealized and denigrated at the same time, without contradiction, while reasserting the European male viewer’s sense of superiority over the object of his gaze (Zamora 1990/1991: 146). From their first encounter, colonists ogled scantily clad Indians, fantasized about native women as sexual objects, and produced minutely detailed descriptions of their physical appearance. John Lawson, for example, a surveyor in the Carolinas, wrote of Indian women that:

when young, and at Maturity, they are as fine-shap’d Creatures (take them generally) as any in the Universe. They are of a tawny Complexion; their Eyes very brisk and amorous; their Smiles afford the finest Composure a Face can possess; their Hands are of the finest Make, with small long Fingers, and as soft as their Cheeks; and their whole Bodies of a smooth Nature. They are not so uncouth or unlikely, as we suppose them; nor are they Strangers or not Proficients in the soft Passion. (Lawson 1984 [1709]: 189–90)

By contrast, Lawson (and others) portrayed Indian men as effete and without ardor, and hence unable to satisfy libidinous Indian women. “*Indian* Men are not so vigorous and impatient in their Love as we are,” he wrote. “Yet the Women are quite contrary, and those *Indian* Girls that have convers’d with the *English* and other *Europeans*, never care for the Conversation of their own Countrymen afterwards” (Lawson 1984 [1709]: 193). In this depiction, feminized Indian men offered no competition to lusty Englishmen for the sexual interest of native women. This notion of an absent sex drive in Indian men, combined with the belief that they failed to make proper and profitable use of the land, reinforced a colonial masculinity that expressed its manhood in an impulse for sexual as well as geographical conquest.

Karen Kupperman argues that English concerns with gender roles and class relations among Indians initially outstripped an interest in racial difference. Colonial leaders were especially keen on ascertaining that Indians had gender roles and distinctions of status (made visible in posture, gestures, clothing, and hair styles) that affirmed the social hierarchy in England and its supposedly natural underpinnings of gender and class. Such hierarchies among Indians also seemed to suggest that “civilizing” the natives would not be too difficult. Consequently, contradictory images evolved that included not only effete Indian men but also noble, dignified savages who formed a natural aristocracy. Skin color was not yet as important as other markers of difference; only when Indians proved unwilling to assimilate did colonials assert immutable categories of racial difference.

For a long time, in fact, no consensus prevailed among the English as to the cause, permanence, or even precise shade of Indians’ complexions. Captain Arthur Barlowe

reported in 1585 that Indians on the Carolina coast were “of a colour yellowish,” while other travelers described Native Americans as tawny, brown, olive, russet, or copper. Many, like John Smith, believed that Indians “are borne white” and then purposefully darken their skin. James Adair, who lived among the Cherokee and Chickasaw for many decades, proclaimed “that the Indian colour is not natural; but that the external difference between them and the whites, proceeds entirely from their customs and method of living, and not from any inherent spring of nature.” North America’s “parching winds, and hot sun-beams . . . necessarily tarnish their skins with the tawny red colour,” while the constant application of bear’s grease “mixt with a certain red root” produces in a few years “the Indian colour in those who are white born.” Europeans could change their skin color as well. Adair knew “a Pennsylvanian, a white man by birth, and in profession a christian, who, by the inclemency of the sun, and his endeavours of improving the red colour, was tarnished as deep an Indian hue, as any of the camp, though they had been in the woods only the space of four years.” In these descriptions, color was only skin deep, the result of exposure to the elements combined with applied color. (Barlowe 1966 [1584–5]: 107; Smith cited in Kupperman 1997: 207; Adair cited in Williams 1930 [1775]: 4.)

Malleable categories of racial difference, however, meant that erotic images of Indian women could create a “dilemma for a male colonist, as expression of the erotic may signal his own lapse into savagery” (Robertson 1996: 561). Some feared that intermarriage with Indians – especially among the lower ranks of colonists – would lead to complete assimilation to Indian ways. Others, hoping instead that Indian women would become anglicized and in the process bring native lands under colonial control, made gendered distinctions of race, depicting Indian women as lighter-skinned than Indian men. William Bartram, for example, believed that Cherokee women had a “complexion rather fairer than the men’s.” Englishmen fantasized not only that Indian women were paler than native men, but also that they preferred to bear white children. Lawson believed the “handsome” Congaree women of South Carolina “esteem[ed] a white Man’s Child much above one of their getting” (Bartram cited in Waselkov and Braund 1995: 150–1; Lawson 1984 [1709]: 35–6). Men like Bartram and Lawson projected not only that native women preferred white children, but also that the descendents of an English–Indian union would eventually approximate the skin color of the white ancestor. Those who promoted intermarriage as a means of infiltrating Indian culture and acquiring land thus downplayed differences between Indian women and English men, racializing Native Americans in ways that served an ideology of conquest.

The discourse about intercultural unions explicitly addressed concerns about class. Lawson, who supported colonial intermarriage with Indians, made it clear that only “ordinary People, and those of a lower Rank” should do so (Lawson 1984 [1709]: 244–5). The well-to-do considered lower-class English people closer to a savage state anyway. In an English culture obsessed with genealogy and bloodlines, the lower orders could hardly claim purity of blood, nor could they necessarily insist on their own “whiteness” as the concept was developing. Some well-heeled colonists assumed that Indians could be no worse than the already crude members of the lower ranks.

Virginia slaveholder William Byrd, for example, compared Indian women favorably with the English women transported (often from workhouses) to the fledgling Virginia colony, and he felt he could “safely venture to say, the Indian women would have made altogether as Honest wives for the first Planters, as the Damsels they us’d to purchase from aboard the Ships” (Byrd 1829: 120–2). But as race gradually took on fixed qualities and “redness” came to connote permanent degradation, English ideas about assimilation also changed, reflecting the shift toward more entrenched assumptions about innate difference. As the balance of power in intercultural relations shifted to colonial advantage, so too did depictions of voluptuous and eager Indian maidens give way to more standard images of primitive and dirty drudges.

Images of African Women

While images of Indian women fluctuated considerably over the colonial era and shifted according to political expediency, European depictions of African women appear to have stabilized earlier into a negative stereotype. Winthrop Jordan details Europeans’ interest in Africans from the mid-sixteenth century on, and he notes longstanding assumptions of primitive and oversexed African women and men. Women were described as lascivious and crude, with overheated passions, while African men (in contrast to effete Native American men) were thought to be lustful and endowed with immense sexual organs. These images of African men, Jordan says, reveal European men’s anxiety about them as sexual competitors and at the same time implied that white men exercised civilized sexual self-restraint. Other scholars of English culture have developed more explicitly the ways in which images of Africans shaped the identity of English men and women as “white.” Kim Hall’s examination of English literature, painting, and material culture from 1550 to 1640 reveals the pervasive use of racialized language and “tropes of blackness” by which English people created identities for themselves as white women and men. Felicity Nussbaum shows how eighteenth-century English novels invented the African woman as “inscrutable and sexually amorphous.” Nussbaum argues that upper-class English women imagined English servants and prostitutes as aligned with “savage” African women, while their own monogamous and middle-class maternity helped “to consolidate the national cultural identity” (Nussbaum 1995: 3, 74). Eighteenth-century literature thus braided together anxieties about female sexual propriety, racial difference, class distinctions, and national identity.

Historians are beginning to focus on other written sources to explore how images of African women interacted with European culture, identity, and an ideology of colonialism. Travel accounts differ from novels and plays in that they purport to be accurate reports of people and places the author has seen, but as Mary Louise Pratt explains, travelogues, like natural histories, framed other peoples in ways that aided the colonial enterprise as well. The language of natural science employed by European observers encompassed new lands and peoples within a homogenizing scientific framework, giving readers the sense that they could easily control unfamiliar people. Jennifer Morgan’s analysis of travel writing from the sixteenth through the late

eighteenth centuries demonstrates some of the “negative symbolic work” that representations of black women performed for readers in early modern England. The female African body appeared in travel literature as “both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black.” These contradictory images of black women as both mothers and monsters marked the edges of the familiar (maternity) and the strange (monstrosity), creating a discourse of racial difference that was “deeply imbued with ideas about gender and sexual difference” (Morgan 1997: 169–70). In particular, depictions of women who shamelessly suckled their offspring in public with breasts so long they could be flung over their shoulders evoked images of animal teats (see plate 2). Furthermore, the belief that African women experienced painless childbirth made their reproduction (like their nursing) seem mechanical and effortless. Edward Long wrote in 1774 that black women in Jamaica “are delivered with little or no labour; they have therefore no more occasion for midwives than the female oran-outang, or any other wild animal” (ibid.: 189). Represented as both sexual and savage, African women appeared perfectly suited for the productive and reproductive labor of slavery. More studies on images of black women in sources purporting to be nonfiction will be a welcome contribution to the field. While there have been great gains in the social history of

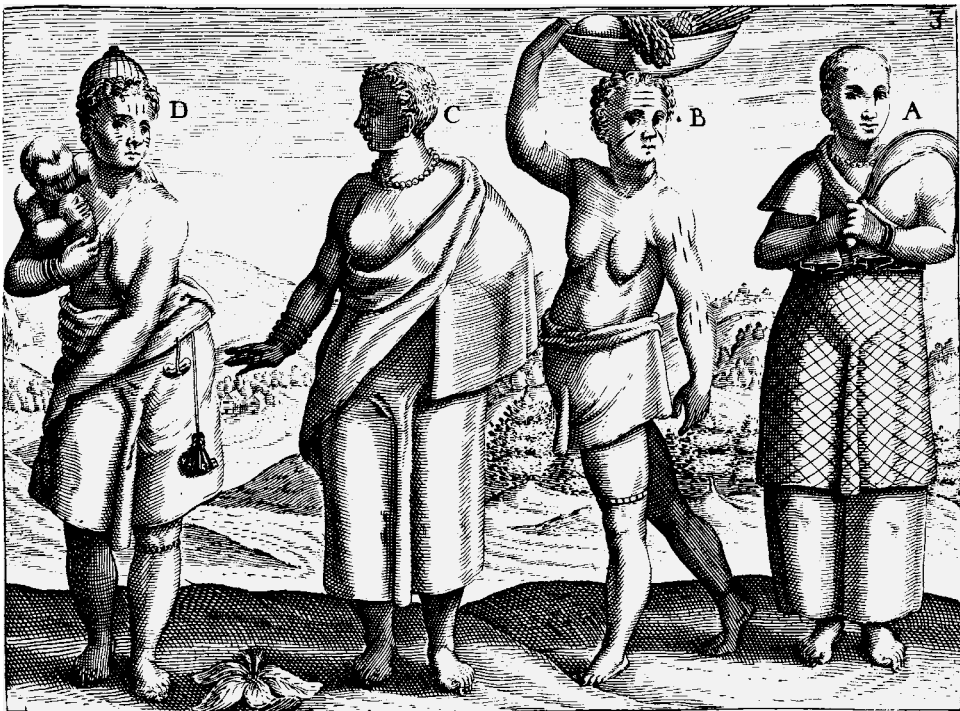


Plate 2 Women in Africa, from *Verum et Historicam Descriptionem Avriferi Regni Guineae*, in Theodor de Bry, *Small Voyages*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1604), plate 3. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library of the Johns Hopkins University.