

Inauguraldissertation
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
eines Doktors der Philosophie
der Philosophischen Fakultät der
Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald

vorgelegt von
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Greifswald im April 2003

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Datum der Disputation:	21. November 2003

“The Real Invisible Man”:

Women of Color,
Their Texts
and
Postwar America
(1945-1960)

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As feminist critics, . . . we speak of making our knowledge of history, choosing to see it not as a tale of individual and inevitable suffering, but a story of struggle and relations of power. We speak of making our notion of literary texts, choosing to read them not as meditations upon themselves but as gestures toward history and gestures with political effect. Finally, we speak of making our model of literary criticism, choosing to see it not an ostensibly objective reading of a text but an act of political intervention, a mode of shaping the cultural use to which men's and women's writings will be put.

Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt.

1. Introduction: The Postwar Era, Women of Color and Contemporary Society

American Studies has always had to engage the problem of definition and especially self-definition. Not long ago, the answers to the question "Who are we?" were liable to define American identity as white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle class and male. In contrast to this image, most recent controversies and discussions within American Studies indicate that the concept of a homogeneous culture, history and identity has lost its exclusive status and hegemonic function and is beginning to be replaced by diverse and disparate images.

The reassessment of American Studies occurs both along horizontal and vertical axes, both in terms of topics and time. Women, African Americans and members of other minority groups both inside and outside academy have criticized the elitist, exclusionary and essentializing character of this model of unity. They have most systematically originated new or neglected subjects, perspectives, and methods with the aim to weave their experiences and identities into the "dominant" discourse on culture and history. This reconceptualization of American Studies is based on the assumption that the idea of a unified, harmonious American society has been abstracted from dynamic categories like gender, race, class and so on. The final product, American culture, which served exclusively those who had the economic,

political and social power in their hands, has been unmasked as a privileged white masculinist preserve.

In the last decade, women's studies gave many impulses to focus on the category "woman" and the female half of human experience. Still challenging explicatory models of culture, history, society, and politics, most recent analyses however cease to look at women alone and highlight instead the category gender which embraces female- as well as male-specific experiences. Feminist critics have rightly argued that *women's studies* bears the danger of separatism by defining itself as a marginal field related to a more central field that is conceded a more universal status. It is not enough, as feminist critics have demonstrated, simply to add women's experiences and perspectives to American Studies. Rather, the future of American Studies contains several tasks of which the most important seems to be to expose the central position of gender in culture, society and history. The importance of the category of gender in American Studies is based on its constitutive function within social organization.

The proposition of gender as the most constitutive among multiple factors has aroused increasing resistance in the last 15 -20 years. Especially African American and Chicana feminist critics have revealed the limitations of the idea of gender as the fundamental principle of social organization. Because gender intersects with other social determinants, like race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and religion among others, an exclusive attention to gender distorts analyses of power relations. Each of these factors has to be viewed "multifocally, conflictually and over time."¹ The extension of feminist theories shows that critics are stepping beyond isolating gender by exploring the impact and meanings of gender contextually.² The present changes promise to be of revisionist character. Not only do they comprise a radical "shift from seeing *women in history* to seeing *all history from the perspective of women*,"³ but they also reveal internal fractures and contradictions of ostensibly simple, consistent categories. Instead of universal human essence and objectivity, the construction of subjectivity becomes the focus of attention.

¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis. "Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies". *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 99.

² See for example Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands: the New Mestiza = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987; or Cheryl A. Wall (ed.). *Changing Our Own Words. Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. London: Routledge, 1990.

³ Kathryn Kish Sklar. "Engendering Women's History: New Paradigms and Interpretations in American History". *Amerikastudien/American Studies*. 41.2 (1996): 208.

The new models and theories about the contents of American Studies have a considerable impact on studies of American history. Scholars of various disciplines, but again particularly feminist thinkers, are engaged in revising previous versions of historical periodization by readdressing historical epochs and challenging earlier accounts.⁴ In response to innovative feminist theories, critics have returned to historical phases which formerly appeared to be sufficiently researched and have initiated a process of questioning standard historical accounts and categories. Already in the 1970s, feminist criticism posed the irritating question “Whose history is it?” or asked what history was going to mean to future generations.⁵ These first efforts to challenge the male-centered historiography were occasionally undermined by their underlying traditional, male categories and values.⁶ However, the realization that women’s historical experiences were unlike men’s, and the acknowledgment of differences among women along class and racial lines, pushed (feminist) historians into reexamining accepted periodizations, divisions and images of history.

Even though developments in rethinking culture and history should not be separate, but inextricably intertwined, an almost invisible border frequently seems to separate those disciplines which are contributing to the field of American Studies. True, historians adopt new perspectives and feminists try to apply recent theoretical findings to diverse fields. But while revisionists of American history use various sources to rewrite history, feminist critics of American culture often reveal in their works a strong proclivity to analyze contemporary culture more than past culture. The following inquiry into the American postwar era, which springs from the wave of rethinking American culture and history, wants to help to compensate for some of these insufficiencies.

Much has been written about the years after World War II. Within the voluminous literature on these one and one-half decades various areas of disagreement can be discerned, but there are features that bind most of them together. The great import of that period is rarely contested. Even if the years from 1945 - 1960 often appear less fascinating and stimulating than the decades before or after them, it is generally understood that the postwar era represents the beginning of modern American

⁴ A brilliant example within literary criticism is Gloria T. Hull’s book *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Woman Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, which shows how periodization excludes and tyrannizes women’s writings.

⁵ For an early feminist work, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. “The New Woman and the New History”. *Feminist Studies* 3.1-2 (Fall 1975): 185-98.

society. Characterized by the fear of communism, an increasing military-industrial organization, and an evolving awareness of social inequities and increasing affluence, the era appears as a moment of crisis and transformation when pivotal elements of the world we live in today were consolidated. For a long time, the period has been characterized as overwhelmingly homogeneous, tranquil and conservative. According to this view the widespread vision of consensus prevented more self-critical ideals.

Works devoted to analyzing counter movements or protesting voices predominantly focus on males: communists, homosexuals or the Beats. If women's historians approach this period they usually reinforce the pattern of unanimity and conformity which often derives from an exclusive focus on white, suburban, middle-class women. Women of color still receive little attention. It is in this context that the title of this study, "The Real Invisible Man", has to be understood. It is a term the African American literary critic Mary Helen Washington borrowed from Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel and adapted in order to warrant the necessity of a black feminist criticism. My use of this image is meant to call attention to a series of interconnected phenomena. Originally Ellison employed this phrase to mirror the limitations and constrictions of the world black men inhabited in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to pointing to patterns of isolation and alienation, the image of invisibility also illustrates the fact that many minority communities cultivated for themselves a low profile and avoided any conspicuousness in postwar society. Segregation and prejudices made them cautious about criticizing American social conditions. Washington's adaptation implies the critique that black men held a monopoly on the experience of oppression and suggests that women suffered differently from social marginality.

By taking up Washington's modified expression, I want to introduce a further plane of meaning. Women of color were not only invisible in their times, they still are today in our times; a non-topic in literary circles and social sciences. This lack of public recognition of a variety of postwar realities is shocking. Despite basic revisions of American (literary) history so far, the continuity of invisibility of women of color suggests that the terms of seeing people remained untouched in some fields of research and science.

⁶ Cf. Judith Newton. "History as Usual?: Feminism and the 'New Historicism'". *Cultural Critique*. 9 (Spring 1988): 100.

At issue here is the need to recuperate previously excluded lives of women of color in order to explore the validity of those studies which have ignored them. Were their lives shaped by the same forces that shaped the lives of other Americans? If not, how does this change previous concepts and interpretations of that period? At this point the question about the technique of research into hitherto “hidden” subjects arises. How are we to approach the history of postwar women of color and how are we to weave them into a general view of postwar history and culture? I agree with the Canadian critic Dionne Brand who insists that “a ‘historical fact’ is somewhat more flexible or self-interested than we are normally led to believe, that history has tended to be written by men and about men.”⁷ The method Brand consequently envisions to recover the history of black Canadian women from the 1920s to the 1950s aims at correcting the faultiness of mainstream historiography. To look at the situation of women of color simply from the angle of social history captures only a very small part of that time, because it does not include human subject positions and human agency. More importantly, to center on economic, political and social realities results in reducing women of color to passive recipients of systemic processes. The purpose of elucidating male white historical records means to center the subjectivity and personal history of those who did (and do) not hold power and whose opinions and interpretations have not been recorded in historiography.⁸ While Brand employs oral history as an appropriate method of investigation, I have decided to combine social history with literary accounts by women of color.

It is not incidental that in rethinking feminist literary definitions, which situate literature in relation to history, many critical analyses now begin to underline the interdependence of history and story. Such a relationship indicates not only that literature is history insofar as texts negotiate social and cultural change, but also vice versa. History, then, does not simply refer to events of the past, but to discontinuous and nonlinear stories about the events of the past. From such a point of view, history is less an approximation to the “truth”, but rather a construction from already written stories.

In the last ten years, literature has lost its privileged position among various cultural practices. While legal codes, religious tracts or medical writings have attracted increasing critical interest, the “mystified” position of literary texts has been

⁷ Dionne Brand. *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Women Working in Ontario 1920s-1950s*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1991. 13.

⁸ Brand, *No Burden to Carry*. 31.

deconstructed. Like many other cultural products, literary texts can be read as the author's vision of the world which is informed by the author's subjective position. But in contrast to non-literary or social texts, literary texts reveal in a singular way their relation to men's and women's lives insofar as they point to the various purposes and projects of individuals in specific material circumstances.

My approach thus has to cross the boundaries of different disciplines. I want to avoid both making the text the sole basis of analysis and overstressing social structure. While particular accounts of women of color cannot be understood outside their historical specificity, the concentration on facts and events disregards the subject positions they occupied at that period. To untangle the relationship between postwar developments and the writings of women of color as an exploration of the ways in which writers mediated or transformed their environment, it makes much sense to look at surrounding attitudes and discursive currents at that time. Therefore this analysis is an attempt to bring different academic ways of thinking about American postwar society and history into one volume. Instead of presenting one comprehensive, coherent "counter-history" of women, I want to investigate the era from different angles in five interrelated chapters. Thus chapter two reflects on current scientific approaches to the postwar years, chapter three is engaged in social history, chapter four in discourse analysis, chapter five employs literary criticism while chapter six focuses on literature to recover how women of color represented themselves and their experiences through their writings. Each of these parts of the study can stand by itself and may be read independently: All these parts illuminate the ways in which women form a part of postwar history, society and culture.

In reviewing recent historical and cultural studies, the next chapter pursues a double aim. Firstly, it introduces the postwar period through the lenses of diverse historians and cultural critics and thus summarizes significant developments in postwar society. Secondly, it questions these versions of postwar society by asking for their relevance to the history and culture of a socially heterogeneous and multicultural people.

Literary texts, like any other cultural product, are grounded in a specific sociopolitical history. Because of the political foundation of cultural products, I regard the consideration of extratextual conditions and material practices as necessary parameters of any scientific analysis. Therefore, in chapter three I want to attempt the difficult task of outlining structural shifts in society as far as people and women of

color were concerned. This is difficult, because one and the same figure or fact frequently permits different interpretations, depending on the context in which it is placed. The exploration of material conditions in this period will be enhanced - and strongly contrasted, as we will see - by postwar intellectual controversies on women in society which will be investigated in chapter four. Both areas of research are important, because without the investigation of social relations and prescriptive literature about women's lives, it is scarcely possible to discover the ways in which minority women's texts were related to current social processes and dominant ideologies. My aim is not to expose the ways in which institutions translated the post-1945 discourses of female specificity into action, but to provide the concrete historical context in which literary and non-literary postwar discourses can be embedded. A "natural by-product" of this chapter is that it reveals racist and patriarchal practices and how non-white groups of women dealt with them.

In order to gain insight as to whether the texts of women writers of color followed or challenged postwar prescriptive accounts, one has to determine what these conceptual frameworks implied. In other words, to determine the shape of minority women's subjectivities and experiences also requires an analysis of the terrain of models and images produced by postwar ideologies of womanhood. Therefore, before approaching the ways in which women of color negotiated prevalent codes of femininity, the fourth chapter will examine sociological, psychological, historical and anthropological discourses in which women emerged as a medium of representing ideas about social order and organization in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ This preliminary step is essential, because the theories on femininity endeavored to define what constituted a woman and womanhood and thus were a part of the strategies and subjects of women's writings. Even if women of color lived at the margins of American society, neither the authors nor their protagonists lived in social isolation and remained unaffected by prevalent images. While it would also be fruitful to reconstruct popular notions of womanhood as they were shaped for example by mass circulation magazines¹⁰, I want to determine the inner dynamics of scientific

⁹ This chapter is a somewhat modified discursive analysis in two ways. For one, I intend to look rather literally at how women were written about. I also assume that this "expert knowledge" about women defined normal and abnormal behavior and in consequence helped constitute relationships of power. Implicit in the system considered here is a particular authority to speak and the existence of a public realm that transcends a purely local setting.

¹⁰ See Joanne Meyerowitz. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958". *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 226-262.

debates, because they reveal most clearly the systematic character of prevailing ideologies of femininity. The fourth chapter is not meant to reveal an abstract image against which social, political and economic realities are then to be tested. Images and material worlds are elementary parameters of historical reality, saturated with inherent contradictions which, as I will argue, posed peculiar problems for women of color. My aim is to investigate the meanings of the middle class domestic ideal to women of varied backgrounds who were not white and (possibly) middle class.

To explore the reception, the contestation and the multiple interpretations of role prescriptions, chapters five and six aim at asserting and proving the potential of literature by writers of color for history and historiography. After an excursion into the theoretical assumptions on which my reading of postwar literature is built, I want to introduce and analyze a number of literary texts whose existence has been ignored until today.

The focus on three distinct cultural communities mainly results from the findings of my bibliographic work in libraries in order to rediscover literary texts which were written and published between 1945 and 1960. It should come as no surprise that those writers I found belong to the largest visible minorities in the U. S. at that time: Mexican American, African American and Asian American women.¹¹ One important

¹¹ All those different terms which describe the various ethnic, racial and ethnic racial groups in the U.S. mean different things historically, geographically and ideologically. I will use the generic terms minority women and women of color synonymously. Both terms are problematic, because they collapse important social and ideological differences within these groups. In addition, the first implies and replicates the hierarchical division of society into majority and minority, center and margins. The second term women of color is likewise critical, because its emphasis on external appearance (skin color) naturalizes a cluster of features in terms of purported biological difference. Having these limitations in mind, I am using these terms despite their shortcomings, because both terms are reminders of the existence of group characteristics as organizing principles of social relationships. With respect to women of Mexican descent, I am differentiating between Hispanics, Mexican American women and Chicanas. Hispanic has been designated by the U. S. government to denote all Spanish-speaking or -descending people, but has developed from a cultural classification to a multi-racial category. I will use the term American Mexican women to refer to both immigrant and native-born Mexican women in the U. S. Nuevomexicana and New Mexican women are used to refer to those people who trace their ancestry in the region of New Mexico to colonial times. Because I attempt to use these terms historically, the term Chicana which came into use after the period considered here will be rarely used in this study. The terms black women and African American women are used equally, because writers use both to refer to themselves. The label Asian which refers to the immigrant generation and Asian American which includes the subsequent generations principally refers collectively to various groups that have their origins in Asia. In this investigation I will focus on the history and literature of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans as two examples of this large group.

The topic of accurate racial and ethnic classification deserves further discussion which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter. Within Chicano/a and Latino/a Studies Studies, scholars have been especially sensitive to terminology. See for example Suzanne Oboler. *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995; and Dieter Herms. *Die zeitgenössische Literatur der Chicanos (1959-1988)*. Frankfurt a. M.: Vervuert, 1990. Also the history of Native Americans, whom Columbus called "Indians", clarifies the

exception here seem to be Native American women. This large and culturally heterogeneous community is not considered here simply because my attempt to find publications authored between 1945 and 1960 by this group of women was not successful.¹²

To turn the attention to these neglected writers once more raises the question of the reason behind the amnesia in American studies. Besides the previously mentioned unidimensional focus of American studies, another explanation for the want of interest in the contribution of these writers might be that because of their multinational (and multicultural) origins many authors have not been perceived as American writers. Both the biographies of many writers and their works reveal transgressions of cultural and particularly national frontiers at a time when the political climate encouraged nothing but a declared belief in American culture. Since the exclusion of these writers has not been doubted until today, their inclusion here represents a step of moving beyond accepted, nationally-based segregations to new intellectual mappings. I suppose this inclusion endangers to some degree the construct of nation as one of the most fundamental compartmentalizations of cultural and literary history. Still, I believe that learning to think in less confining categories, be it nation-, or race-, gender- and class-groupings, is a project that is urgently upon us and that will serve us well in a fluid and dynamic, constantly changing world.

artificiality of labels. There are also numerous different designations, ranging from Aboriginal or Indigenous people to First Nations, each mirroring the political standpoint of the user. See here for example Ron Laliberte et. al. (eds.) *Expressions of Canadian Native Studies*. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Press, [2000]. 565-572.

¹² One reason might in fact be a very limited written output of Native American woman authors until the 1970s and 1980s. Thus Native American literary traditions were for a long time dominated by male writers. I expect that any attempt to find pre-1960 literary texts by Native American women is doomed to failure, because this field has already been thoroughly researched without results by Gretchen Bataille, Rayna Green and others. Still, it is thinkable that there exist manuscripts in small state and regional historical society libraries as it is the case with Mexican American literature. Because such an archival work has unfortunately been beyond the scope of my investigation, one purpose of this study is to encourage further research in archives and specialized libraries. See also fn. 391.

2. Institutional Studies and Women of the Postwar Era

The following chapter is meant to provide an overview of more recent studies of postwar history and culture in order to determine the location of minority women in current academic research and to find the common denominators between them. The aim is not only to record prevailing directions in postwar studies, but also to identify the problems and gaps that result from rigidly gender-, race-, and class-specific conceptualizations of American history and culture.

2.1. Postwar Women in Historical Perspective

Since the mid-1980s, a slowly growing number of texts focusing on women's history in postwar America has been published. Many of these researchers rediscovered the post-1945 period, often initiated by a sense of parallelism between political and cultural developments in the forties and in the eighties. While all historical accounts generally emphasize the central relevance of that era for subsequent decades, its underlying ideologies, values and beliefs remain a point of debate. In turn how these decades are to be viewed is also in debate.

Under the influence of Betty Friedan's bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, numerous studies synthesized postwar public discourses into a homogenized narrative of women's domestic entrapment. The prevailing image of the postwar years was that of "Rosie the Riveter", who faithfully returned home to rear children, clean house and radiate unhappiness. Even though from early on, some historians pointed at women's accomplishments, the most vehement resistance against the "conservatism-and-constraints approach"¹³ began to develop from case studies in the middle of the 1980s. These studies revealed multiple fractured pictures of postwar realities and ideals instead of one unifying image.

¹³ I have borrowed this apt term from Joanne Meyerowitz.

2.1.1. Theories of Continuous Domesticity

As early as 1963, Betty Friedan published her far-reaching hypothesis that the postwar time was characterized by a striking discrepancy between female real-life experiences and a conservative ideal of womanhood.¹⁴ At the root of women's position in society, Friedan detects the "feminine mystique" - an ideology that limits a woman's role exclusively to marriage, motherhood and family. In order to solve their inner conflicts and frustrations, Friedan urges women to gain control of their own destiny by finding other meaningful work outside their homes. Friedan's book merits consideration, not only because she gives a name to a problem, but also because she challenges women to change their situation.¹⁵

Friedan's resolutely generalizing assertion of American housewives' discontent informed other more sophisticated and less polemical studies of postwar society. In her studies of the context of feminism in the 1940s and 1950s, Leila Rupp follows Friedan in underlining the quiescence and conformity of those years, the hostility to issues of equal rights and the resulting postwar "antifeminist backlash".¹⁶ Although Rupp's analysis intends to prove the historical continuity of the women's movement, she does not doubt the primacy of the feminine mystique. Rather, this ideal helps to explain the declining state of women's organizations and their failure to win new allies for their cause. In addition to external mechanisms, Rupp discovers internal factors like conservatism and racism that contributed to the movement's lack of appeal. The author suggests that these very structures, which served to hold the feminist community of the 1950s together, were in large part the reaction to an inhospitable and repressive environment.¹⁷ Her unrelenting emphasis on the societal conservatism becomes most obvious in Rupp's warning that the movement's isolation and ineffectivity offered a valuable lesson to the contemporary movement.¹⁸

¹⁴ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

¹⁵ See also Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman. *A History of Women in America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1978. 341ff.

¹⁶ Leila Rupp. *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978; Leila Rupp. "The Survival of American Feminism: The Women's Movement in the Postwar Period". *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions, 1945-1960*. Eds. Robert H. Bremner and Gary W. Reichard. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982. 40-43 and Leila Rupp. "The Women's Community in the National Women's Party, 1945 to the 1960s". *Signs*. 10.4 (1986): 346

¹⁷ Rupp, "The Women's Community", 367f.

¹⁸ Rupp, "The Women's Community", 368.

In stressing continuous conservatism, D'Ann Campbell's *Women at War With America*, published in 1984, leads into a similar direction.¹⁹ Although focusing more on the war years, Campbell also explores the significance of wartime changes for the postwar years. Her central thesis is that the war and the radical shifts in gender role assignments represented only a brief interlude in societal understanding of women's roles. In general, American women were satisfied with the status quo and saw no need to challenge traditional gender boundaries. After the war, Campbell states, American women "withdrew from choice positions in the labor market, picked up life as usual, and benefited from growing prosperity to devote time to their homes and families. . . ." ²⁰ As a reaction to social attitudes and personal values, women imbibed the "'suburban' ideal of compassionate, child-centered marriages, with little scope for careerism. . . ." ²¹

For Campbell, the importance of the war and postwar years derives from the fact that experiences of women contributed to larger transformations in American society which began in the 1920s and which exploded with the women's liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, the change of gender roles and identities was initialized, according to Campbell, by social changes that had already started two decades before World War II. However, the postwar period itself was still marked by conservatism because role expectations generally do not change within the span of a few years, and women in the postwar era still identified primarily with the domestic ideal.

In contrast to Friedan and Campbell, Elaine Tyler May's study *Homeward Bound* roots the continuity of traditional convictions of sex roles in the larger political culture of the Cold War.²² In the anticommunist rhetoric of the fifties the family appeared to be the most important bastion of freedom and democracy. Even though women had proved themselves efficient and competent during the war in traditionally male domains, political and social stability required that women left their work places, returned home and created a "psychological fortress"²³ against foreign and internal dangers. Once again accepting the home as women's proper "sphere", women obeyed the imperatives of domestic ideology and retreated to their families to

¹⁹ D'Ann Campbell. *Women at War With America. Private Lives in a Patriotic Era*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1984.

²⁰ Campbell, *Women at War With America*, 238.

²¹ Campbell, *Women at War With America*, 4.

²² Elaine Tyler May. *Homeward Bound. American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.

preserve family stability and social order. May concludes that fears of another economic depression, anxieties surrounding atomic warfare and the threat of communism contributed to undermining the war's potential for altering gender-role attitudes.

Despite their differences in approaching the postwar history of women, these accounts reveal similarities. All studies agree in their characterization of the postwar decades as conservative, even reactionary years. Institutional and ideological premises hindered women from self-realization and self-actualization. While for example management policies secured the prewar sexual division of labor²⁴, ideological pressure ensured women's agreement with the prescribed gender norms. From this point of view, women are defined mainly in terms of deprivation, manipulation and passivity. In these historical models, women are seen as the objects of postwar conservatism who adopted prescribed gender identities and moved within the boundaries of the socially assigned female sphere.

Because of its pervasiveness and general validity, the ideology of feminine domesticity is conceded central explanatory power for the postwar era. However, this interpretation has considerable limitations. All studies are based on the assumption that women cannot derive satisfaction from motherhood and homemaking. Woman's voluntary restriction to the family is regarded as a product of the domestic ideology, and if she is satisfied, this is even more the case. These studies ignore that some "women genuinely felt that raising children and homemaking were more gratifying than the jobs of their husbands."²⁵ Lacking recognition of the real significance of women's reproductive roles reveals that these studies are also informed by personal conceptions of womanhood and thus continue to assign housewives and mothers secondary status in our society.

Upon closer inspection, these analyses also show that they tend to treat American women, their experiences and their history as a monolithic block. By ignoring the social and racial heterogeneity of American women, these accounts strengthen prevailing stereotypes that define postwar women as white, middle-class, domestic and suburban. As a consequence, they either render other women outside this stereotype invisible or misjudge the relevance of the domestic ideal for those women

²³ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 11.

²⁴ On market mechanisms see Ruth Milkman. *Gender at Work. The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II*. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. 99-154.

²⁵ Hymowitz and Weissman, *History of Women in America*, 342.

who had always been forced to work for their families' survival. Similarly, it is questionable how inextricably interlinked postwar society and the domestic ideal were. Did all Americans regardless of race, class or other social aggregates identify with traditional role assignments? Finally, these works obstruct the view of ambivalences within conventional gender conceptions and block the discovery of other or completely different ideals.

2.1.2. The Discovery of Complexities and Social Changes in the Postwar Period

William Chafe was one of the early historians who did not agree with the all-conservative approach of other scholars. In his *The American Woman*, a study of the changing roles of women in American society, he points out that many women seemed dissatisfied with traditional gender patterns. Instead of returning permanently to the home, increasing numbers of women continued to take jobs.²⁶ Chafe presents a puzzling picture of the postwar time insofar as he juxtaposes women's expanding participation in the labor force with the lack of progress towards equality. However, he successfully destabilizes the myth of women's victimization. Although not denying ideological constraints, Chafe stresses the momentous changes in women's behavior and attitudes.

In a similar vein, Alice Kessler-Harris reveals in her *Out to Work* (1982) the fundamental contradiction of the postwar years: "Beside the overwhelming popular assumption - the certain knowledge of women's fundamental obligations to the home - lay a subtle shift in government policy that insisted on women's capacity to take jobs as well."²⁷ While the ideology of women's home-centeredness was still visible in public discourses, more and more women entered the labor market on a permanent basis and professed a growing dissent from the image of the happy housewife. In this context, Kessler-Harris argues, the feminine mystique cannot be interpreted simply as a symbol of women's subordination, but rather as an attempt to reconcile the competing interests of home and work.

²⁶ William Chafe. "World War II as a Pivotal Experience for American Women". *Women and War. The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s*. Eds. Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. New York, Oxford, Munich: Berg. 28

²⁷ Alice Kessler-Harris. *Out to Work. A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. 300.

While the transformation of women's work forms the centerpiece of Kessler-Harris's book, Susan Hartmann's study on the 1940s traces changes in various aspects of women's status. In her *The Home-Front and Beyond*, she investigates the political, economic and social context of women's lives during and after the war years.²⁸ Being convinced of the centrality of this decade for living patterns of American men and women, Hartmann offers a carefully balanced conclusion. She argues that overall continuities characterized the postwar time, but that it is "also possible to identify in that decade seeds of change which worked a deeper transformation in women's consciousness, aspirations, and opportunities a generation or so later."²⁹ Hartmann agrees with Tyler May in that conservative forces prevented immediate transformations in gender roles. In contrast to the proponents of the conservatism-and-constraints-approach, Hartmann describes the war-impelled changes as durable. But she does not agree with Chafe's view of the decade as a watershed either and portrays it instead as a bridge between the forties and the sixties. Therefore, she reasons that the importance of these years was based on a process of reshaping women's social, political and economic lives.

With her focus on women activists, Susan Lynn proposes in her study *Progressive Women in Conservative Times* a revision of women's postwar history.³⁰ Lynn also understands these times as a decade when vigorous attempts were made to silence female voices, but she simultaneously discovers crucial similarities between the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s and women's progressive activism in the 1940s and the 1950s. Lynn's study points at current scholarly distortions of the postwar discourse of domesticity. Firstly, she criticizes that historians assume rather than demonstrate the all-pervasiveness of the domestic ideal. Secondly, she objects to those studies which claim marriage and family on the one hand, and social and political activities on the other, as irreconcilable antagonisms. Most importantly, Lynn emphasizes that different groups of women had fundamentally different relationships with the ideal of domesticity, because "it is clear that domestic seclusion is an option only for those with a certain degree of financial resources."³¹ Lynn submits an impressive explanation for the roots of the sixties' explosion of social protest by

²⁸ Susan M. Hartmann. *The Homefront and Beyond. American Women in the 1940s*. Boston: Twayne, 1982.

²⁹ Hartmann, *The Home-Front and Beyond*, 215.

³⁰ Susan Lynn. *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

³¹ Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*, 12.

examining the convictions, strategies and outcome of postwar women activists and their organizations.

Given the individual authorship of this briefly surveyed body of texts dealing with the postwar time, it should come as no surprise that most interpretations highlight unity and consensus and try to provide a comprehensive history of that era. In this respect, Joanne Meyerowitz's anthology *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* represents a noteworthy and important development in American historiography.³² As Meyerowitz's comments imply, each case study is informed by the author's individual views and political convictions. The essays enlighten most different facets of postwar society without reinforcing persistent stereotypes. The authors of this anthology focus on less popular and researched aspects of the postwar years. The guiding principle of that volume is not only that it is impossible to encompass all crucial developments of that time into a historical synthesis, but that history is characterized by fragmentation, contradiction and diversity. Avoiding "one overarching history of women or one gender ideology, it relates multiple histories of women and multiple constructions of gender."³³ Therefore the pictures that are painted in *Not June Cleaver* present the period in a most contradictory light: the essays disclose conservatism and change; activism, feminism and the domestic ideal; employment and maternalism; adjustment and deviation.

While the obsession with traditional gender roles in the postwar era is a definite point of focus in *Not June Cleaver*, the essays are attentive to the disparate effects of dominant ideologies of womanhood and repressive power relations on different social groups of women. In the section "Women and Wage Labor", Xiaolan Bao analyzes how Chinese immigrant women remained relatively untouched by the celebration of domesticity and continued to work outside the home for financial reasons or personal satisfaction. Another study by Margaret Rose illustrates how Mexican American women revised the domestic ideal. They became crucial in organization-management and social activities to improve the living conditions in Mexican American communities and successfully combined public roles and private spheres.

³² Joanne Meyerowitz (ed.). *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

In the section “Constructions of Womanhood”, historians Joanne Meyerowitz, Ruth Feldstein and Regina Kunzel scrutinize the impact of dominant discourses on woman- and motherhood on white and black women. In particular, Feldstein’s “‘I Wanted the Whole World to See’: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till” and Kunzel’s “White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States” most successfully demonstrate the ways in which constructions of “race” and gender were constantly in dialogue and entered into postwar political discourses.

Feldstein’s analysis of the murder of Emmett Till discloses constructs of racialized motherhood which surrounded Emmett’s mother Mamie Bradley Till. In “laying claim to the overlapping values of ‘good mother’ and respectable, moral woman, Bradley resisted definitions of womanhood that either excluded black women by virtue of their ‘race’ or rendered black mothers as dominating and pathological.”³⁴ Further, the decision to expose her lynched son in an open casket helped to mobilize both black and white antiracists. Yet, Feldstein shows that Bradley’s claims to motherhood and respectability were two-edged insofar as social definitions of womanhood were often restricting rather than empowering. As a result of Bradley’s independence, she was dismissed from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and hence dissociated from a political antiracist organization.

Kunzel pursues further the impact of racial difference on predominant constructions of womanhood. She investigates the postwar dichotomization of conceptions of black and white single mother pregnancy. White illegitimacy was interpreted as a symptom of mental illness, while black illegitimacy was understood as a symptom of cultural deviancy. These assumptions point again at profoundly racialized discourses of motherhood and womanhood. They not only had material consequences for individual women, such as the denial of public funds, but more importantly suggest that race, as powerfully and pervasively as gender, determined the form and shape of the ideology of the family that stood at the heart of the

³³ Joanne Meyerowitz. “Introduction: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960”. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 5.

³⁴ Ruth Feldstein. “‘I Wanted the Whole World to See’: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till”. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 288.

postwar political agenda.”³⁵ Both Feldstein and Kunzel place intersecting discourses on race and gender in postwar history - discourses which have been ignored largely in traditional political history - and thus reveal the political meanings of these constructions.

The last section in *Not June Cleaver*, which deals with “Sexual Outlaws and Cultural Rebels”, focuses on the social demonization and individual resistance of women who did not conform to (hetero)sexual conventions.

In conclusion, the case studies in this collection, which share an interest in the diverse meanings of the domestic ideal, challenge accounts of postwar conservatism and constraints. They shy away from generalizations based on white, middle-class realities, highlight the diversity among women and their different strategies to rework and transform prescriptive gender norms and values.

2.2. Cultural Studies and the Postwar Era

Cultural Studies has been established as the predominant “battlefield” where American intellectual life of the forties and fifties has been reconstructed. Over the past two decades, an impressive number of texts dealing with the culture of the postwar era has been published. Researchers have concentrated on arts, films, television shows, popular music, magazines and literature to uncover how Americans experienced and interpreted the beginning of a new phase in modern history and culture.³⁶

³⁵ Regina Kunzel. “White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States”. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 324.

³⁶ For studies that focus on art, see Irving Sandler. *The New York School: the Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978; Jane De Hart Matthews. “Art and Politics in Cold War America”. *American Historical Review*. 81(October 1976): 762-787; on film, see Barbara Deming. *Running Away from Myself: A Dream Portrait of America Drawn from the Films of the 40's*. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1969; Andrew Dowdy. *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind*. New York: Morrow, 1975; Gordon Gow. *Hollywood in the Fifties*. New York: Barnes, 1971; Larry Langman and Daniel Finn. *A Guide to American Crime Films of the Forties and Fifties*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995; Ann Lloyd. *Movies of the Fifties*. London: Orbis Publications, 1982; Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy. *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981; Dana Polan. *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986; Nora Sayre. *Running Time: Films of the Cold War*. New York: Dial, 1982; Brandon French. *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1978; Jackie Byars. *All that Hollywood Allows: Re-Reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1991; Andrea S. Walsh. *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950*. New York: Praeger, 1984; on television see Ella Taylor. *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in*

Until the 1970s, cultural theorists and critics continued to ignore the interconnectedness between culture and larger arenas of power, policy and public discourse. In the midst of the Cold War scare, critics asserted that a cultural “cordon sanitaire”³⁷ had been constructed as an internal security strategy against foreign threats. Being assigned an unprecedented cultural authority, critics and intellectuals declared a “culture of the whole”³⁸ which required an uncompromising denial of social, political and cultural complexities.³⁹ Additionally, the economic boom of the immediate postwar years made it easy to perceive a new classless and therefore homogeneous society where white- and blue-collar workers benefited from postwar prosperity alike. Because economic and social inequalities ceased to exist, or at least as some commentators claimed, any cultural differentiation according to class and prestige proved to be irrelevant. Sharp critics like William H. Whyte or Herbert Marcuse sometimes expressed their unease with what were seen as the prevailing traits of modern society, mass culture and mass consumption.⁴⁰ But neither doubters nor celebrants questioned the implicit assumption that culture was a homogeneous and monolithic mass phenomenon.

The uproar of the sixties and seventies shattered these pervasive notions into a battleground. In response to the breakdown of the hegemonial construct of a seamless culture, it became impossible to see American culture as an unitary and autonomous entity. The research of the last two decades has begun to question the ideal of a national culture and suggests consensus, conflict and plurality instead. In an effort to investigate the current assumptions, objectives and methodological strategies that characterize the cultural studies of postwar America, I want to focus on three recent volumes which illustrate the practice of cultural studies and which

Post-War America. Berkeley, 1989; on popular music see Joe Goldberg. *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1980; Jody Pennington. “Don’t Knock the Rock: Race, Business, and Society in the Rise of Rock’n Roll”. *Cracking the Ike Age. Aspects of Fifties America*. Ed. Dale Carter. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992. 214-237.

³⁷ I borrow this term from Andrew Ross. *No Respect. Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. New York, London: Routledge, 1989. 43.

³⁸ With this term, William Graebner describes the cultural homogenization of the postwar years in his *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.

³⁹ Ross, *No Respect*, 42f. See also Jackson Lears. “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society”. *Recasting America. Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. Ed. Lary May. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 38-57. Lears, however, roots the postwar emphasis of a holistic culture in the early years of the twentieth century, reinforced by the Great Depression and World War II.

⁴⁰ William H Whyte. *The Organization Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956; Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Sociology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon, 1964. See also Dwight MacDonald. “A Theory of Mass Culture”. *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*.

claim to provide innovative views on the culture of the postwar era. The three texts are *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (1989), edited by Lary May; William Graebner's *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (1991); and *Cracking the Ike Age: Aspects of Fifties America* (1992), edited by Dale Carter.

At first glance, the fact that both *Recasting America* and *Cracking the Ike Age* are text collections of most different authors seems to defy the task of a brief consideration. Still, both authors stress that each volume represents an interdisciplinary approach to the field of postwar culture reworking the much-insisted-upon feature of conformity. In terms of methodology, each book breaks with notions of consensus by presenting an array of diverse subject matters, approaches and interpretations.

May's much acclaimed *Recasting America* is an ambitious project. Stating that the "study of postwar America . . . is in need of a vigorous infusion of new ideas and approaches,"⁴¹ May obviously sets out to outline these new ideas and methods. What then is so remarkable about this collection? Despite all heterogeneity, the authors in *Recasting America* share an engagement in similar questions: Why did the coherent cultures of the past transform into a postwar culture which was characterized by fragmentation and anxiety throughout? How did this shift happen? May divides the answers to these questions in this anthology into three different schools of thought.

The first set of writers lay the book's theoretical foundation by showing that American cultural life was characterized by profound contradictions. While Warren Susman surveys very distinct fields like politics, literature, film or comics, Jackson Lears draws on postwar intellectual thought. According to Susman, the most salient feature of the postwar time was an internal contradiction which consisted of the pervasive "consciousness of an ideal, completed society" on the one hand and "inner rebellion"⁴² on the other. Lears in turn sees the contradiction mainly in the postwar intellectual prescription of consensual culture and the undermining growth of countercultural forces. In both essays, however, the centrality of conformity shapes

Eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. New York: Free Press, 1957. 59-73; Lionel Trilling. *The Liberal Imagination*. New York: Viking, 1950.

⁴¹ Lary May. "Introduction". *Recasting America. Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. Ed. Lary May. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 9.

what is considered and presented as postwar culture and informs the selection of what constitutes the postwar cultural discourse. To examine the ambivalent consequences of *postwar* affluence, Susman concentrates on collective representations of the white middle-class. His search for a distinct postwar American culture is thus restricted to a middle-class arena which Susman assigns a representative function. Lears's admittedly critical analysis of the academic discourse is similarly based on white, male upper middle-class discursive practice. But although Lears intends to "acknowledge the persistence of a certain degree of cultural pluralism,"⁴³ his insistence on a dominant culture of consensus and subordinate subcultures indicates that he does not challenge traditional cultural hierarchies. The cultural developments that Susman and Lears reconstruct are largely middle-class, white and male, and for this reason they dismiss cultural participation of women and minorities as negligible.

In spite of different topics and strategies, the essays in the second set of *Recasting America* for the most part follow the way prepared by Susman and Lears. These studies address postwar trends in such distinct areas as historical thought, social sciences, legal writing, Hollywood politics, sexuality and suburban architecture. What all the essays have in common is that they - more or less consciously - establish middle-class preoccupations, values and ideologies as norm. Although for example minority groups as well as women enter into Lary May's "Movie Star Politics: The Screen Actors' Guild, Cultural Conversion, and the Hollywood Red Scare" and Elaine Tyler May's "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb", the two essays still reinforce the image of the postwar time as a conformist era. Both texts deal centrally with the interdependency between assimilationist ideologies and cultural life. Rather than question the general validity of these ideologies for all Americans, May and Tyler May underscore the uniformity of American society. Dissident groups and voices are rarely points of focus while containment and compliance become the defining characteristics of the postwar time.

In the last part of the book, entitled "The Search for Alternatives: Art, Minorities, and Popular Culture", the focus finally shifts from consensus to plurality. This is not to say that the authors in this section deny the conformist structures of the postwar

⁴² Warren Susman. "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America". *Recasting America. Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. Ed. Lary May. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 30.

⁴³ Lears, "A Matter of Taste", 49.

years, but they counterbalance the anthology's tendency towards social and cultural homogenization by disclosing different American ways of life. Albeit in differing ways, each essay challenges the notion of postwar conformity which urged many artists, writers and musicians to search for other cultural vehicles to express deep-seated dissent.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that *Recasting America* outlines postwar ideologies which are fractured by ambivalences and tensions as May proposes in his introduction. Yet these ideologies are primarily linked to white, male and middle-class experiences and therefore operate within the boundaries of traditional definitions of culture. Without specifying their own concepts of culture, most authors presuppose American culture as a whole. Even though in some analyses the existence of diverse cultures is implicitly acknowledged, this does not lead to a reassessment of cultural definitions.⁴⁴ Only four out of fourteen essays object to the omnipresence of white, male, middle-class culture by exploring the patterns of divergent cultures and their relation to an established bourgeois culture. The majority of the contributors however reveals a conventionally narrow definition of what they understand as postwar culture which tends to be more discriminating than inclusive.

In his *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s*, William Graebner offers careful readings of cultural documents which are interpreted within a broad historical context. Like *Recasting America*, *The Age of Doubt* covers a wide range of cultural fields. Graebner turns to literature, film noir, abstract expressionism, systems theory, philosophy and other areas to depict the beginning of the Cold War era. His basic assumption is that the forties were a time of paradoxes. On the one hand, American people faced unprecedented civil prosperity and national power. On the other hand, they were immersed in feelings of anxiety, caused by the trauma of war and Cold War and visible in all forms of cultural expression. Beneath an optimistic surface, moments of doubt and disappointment increasingly permeated American culture.

Graebner distinguishes between five different issues of postwar culture: economical, existential and ethical contingency; the significance of history; national homogenization; identity and the self; and freedom. He delineates the sources of these concerns, their meaning, their structures, and their representation in culture to

⁴⁴ Lears's "A Matter of Taste" is a good example of this neglect.

prove how these issues were generated and influenced by postwar confusion and pessimism.

By giving priority to the concept of a unified culture, Graebner's study points back to the older models of cultural conformity. Yet, *The Age of Doubt* demonstrates that the oft-deplored "culture of the whole" was a set of ideas which was fueled by postwar insecurities and anxieties.⁴⁵ Next to signifying social realities, Graebner claims, this set suggested "what *ought* to be"⁴⁶ and thus functioned like an ideology. This is a far-reaching observation which Graebner underlines: "This assimilationist message was by and large an ideological one, a reflection of the *desire* of the dominant culture, but by no means an accurate representation of reality."⁴⁷ But even though Graebner generally acknowledges the "culture of the whole" as fiction of the dominant society, he himself paradoxically interprets cultural documents rather as mimetic and reliable accounts of social lives than as sites of ideological production and reproduction. Therefore *The Age of Doubt* is interspersed with only occasional glances at those groups which were not identified with and excluded from the culture of the whole.⁴⁸

This inattention to the ways in which ideology and culture intersect partially results from Graebner's declaration in the preface that he wants to understand and render "the American 1940s as a coherent cultural moment."⁴⁹ How then does he blend all the disparate and conflicting forms of culture into a consistent pattern? Graebner does not bluntly claim that his study is representative of all American culture, but it is interesting which cultural sources count as such and which do not. Asked more polemically, whose culture is it that Graebner investigates to find out the dominant features? The authors he cites read like traditional literary history: Arthur Miller, Ezra Pound, Eugene O'Neill and other mainly male and white authors of the postwar era. Prominent exceptions are Rachel Carson, Carson McCullers, Mary McCarthy, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Although Graebner does not only focus on literature, but bases his analysis on a variety of cultural forms, the question arises if the consideration of other less canonical and more dissimilar literary voices would lead to different conclusions. It is this very concentration on a selection of cultural

⁴⁵ Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, 78-99.

⁴⁶ Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, 78.

⁴⁷ Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, 96.

⁴⁸ Only in the chapter "The Culture of the Whole", does Graebner point to discrepancies between ideologies as expressed in mainstream culture and "race", class and gender differences.

⁴⁹ Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, XIV.

products that enables Graebner to postulate a postwar emphasis on unity. He seems to have chosen writers who most embraced ideas of unity and consensus. The marginalization and silencing of non-canonical and dissenting literary texts downplays the extent to which the belief in a collective and harmonious national will was already undermined.

For this reason, Graebner fails to incorporate recent redefinitions of American culture. Instead, he draws on a hierarchical model of American culture that privileges some cultural products over others. This model is basically static, for it takes for granted the existence of an American core experience and disregards the plurality of American experiences, identities and cultures.

Dale Carter also claims to provide fresh perspectives on postwar America. In the collection *Cracking the Ike Age. Aspects of Fifties America* (1992) subject matters range from diplomacy and civil protest to humor and popular music.⁵⁰ Thus *Cracking the Ike Age* presents classic analyses of Cold War politics as well as scarcely-analyzed aspects of American culture, society and politics. As the various views on the 1940s and the 1950s make clear, the era was far from being monolithic. There is no single image that could aptly characterize the decade: establishmentarians existed side by side with dissidents and outcasts; feelings of insecurity were complemented by a sense of jeopardy and vulnerability.

One important reason for the heterogeneous nature of *Cracking the Ike Age* is certainly a clear attention to race and class differences. However, despite its complexity, this collection demonstrates the want of interest within cultural studies in issues of gender and its correlation with other categories. Because both editor and contributors avoid outlining a theoretical cultural framework, this lack seems to be less the result of intentional exclusion, but rather reflects the generally marginalized status of concepts of gender inequality within cultural studies. One of the reasons why issues of importance to feminist theories are neglected can be seen in the collections' underlying understanding of culture. Culture here is conceived in traditional terms which are generally derived from male achievements and usually fail to represent the ways in which women construct and contribute to culture. Measured against male public performance, only few postwar women gained recognition and it

⁵⁰ Dale Carter (ed.). *Cracking the Ike Age. Aspects of Fifties America*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992.

is this male-defined norm which obstructs an understanding both of women's cultural existence and of the operations of culture in the perpetuation of gender inequalities.

This leads to the question of gender differences. While historians of the postwar decades have begun to follow the feminist calls for "gendering" history, which means looking at history from the point of view of gender, these sorts of arguments have only rarely been made with respect to American culture. In American historiography the existence of women's history as a distinct field within "mainstream" history does not necessarily find consent among all feminists⁵¹, but it represents at least an epistemological reorientation. By contrast, cultural studies exhibited more difficulties in breaking with notions of a unified, masculinist culture. Except for some individual works, gender as a structural category is mostly absent from postwar cultural studies. If critics of postwar culture draw pictures of uniformity, these images almost automatically slight the varieties of American culture.

In order to show the potentially transformative effect of a feminist perspective on the postwar era, I want to consider three different texts which put gender next to race and class at the center of attention: Eugenia Kaledin's *Mothers and More. American Women in the 1950s* (1984), Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung's *Women and War. The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s* (1990) and the essay "Domestic Blitz: A Revisionist History of the Fifties" (1993) by Gaile McGregor.

Kaledin does not explicitly situate her study in a specific kind of feminist theory and politics. However her quotation of Gerda Lerner indicates that her background is not only, as she says, in American Studies, but also very much in a certain part of Women's History that tries to establish different categories and criteria for women. Kaledin asks, like Lerner, "to refine our means of assessing how women view decisions in historical perspective. It is too easy to allow traditional definitions of power to diminish women's achievements as they have similarly limited women's opportunities."⁵² By proposing a separate women's culture of the fifties, Kaledin wants to investigate women's cultural power. At the same time she intends to revise the "dominant myth of [postwar women's] victimization"⁵³ and traces the lives and works of prominent women authors, artists, and activists who stepped beyond the

⁵¹ See for example Joan W. Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

⁵² Eugenia Kaledin. "Preface". *Mothers and More. American Women in the 1950s*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984. S.p.p.

domestic ideal. With this aim, Kaledin refuses to reduce women to the role of a passive victim and instead shows women's responsibilities as part of American culture.⁵⁴

The developments and events that Kaledin explores are all connected with women and their cultural activities which altogether invalidate the view of the time as years of retrenchment for women. Kaledin also repudiates older cultural models which either restrict postwar culture to male achievements or emphasize women's more or less willing adaptation to this cultural system. These concepts generally deny women the role of active contributors. To make women's material contributions visible, Kaledin focuses on the changes in educational patterns to adapt to women's needs, on the increase of married women in the labor force, women's roles in grass-roots politics, the influence of female newspaper publishers and cultural critics, on women writers, artists and scholars, and on the achievements in such areas as abortion, birth control, physical and psychological health.

In some ways, Kaledin writes an alternative cultural "herstory", but the reproach that undertaking research on culturally pioneering women means to affirm masculine standards of power and performance is inappropriate. Contrary to traditional histories of postwar culture which measure women's cultural productions against male standards, Kaledin outlines the contours of a gendered cultural history which redefines our understanding of what we mean by "culture". As a result, Kaledin concludes that beneath the social standstill, women at least developed personally. Without being overtly feminist, women expanded the narrow boundaries of the domestic ideal and expressed their social and political concerns at all levels of American culture. In this sense, women in the 1960s translated the attitudes of women of the 1950s into action and proved to be social actors rather than helpless victims of a patriarchal society. Kaledin adds to the historical kaleidoscope of the postwar era, but contrary to scholars like May, Graebner and Carter. *Mothers and More* exemplifies how American culture of the postwar decade has to be reassessed if gender is to be weaved into cultural and historical analyses.

Like *Mothers and More*, the conceptions of history and culture as revealed in the collection *Women and War* evince a clear indebtedness to feminist orientations

⁵³ Kaledin, "Preface", s.p.p.

⁵⁴ This responsibility has to be seen not only in positive but also in negative terms, because it also entails women's compliance in the reproduction of gender stereotypes.

within cultural studies.⁵⁵ Although the temporal framework in *Women and War* is broader, the contributors share with Kaledin the concern of not only adding to the traditional historiography the experiences of women, but also of revealing how women themselves reflected upon the post-1945 discourse of femininity and domesticity. They also want to demonstrate that postwar women were more than simply manipulated marionettes.

By positioning *Women and War* within feminist theory and quoting Sacvan Bercovitch, the editors reveal priorities slightly different from Kaledin's. Their goal is to write women into American (literary) history, but they are not only aware of the differences between men and women, but also of the differences among women. Thus the editors warn that any "monolithic approach falsifies women's experiences" and "transfers this literature of one prison of preconceived patterns to another."⁵⁶ While Kaledin underlines the productivity of individual women and its significance for postwar culture, Diedrich and Fischer-Hornung conceptualize the body of women's aesthetic productions as a heterogeneous, diversified and contradictory corpus. *Women and War* succeeds like *Mothers and More* in circumventing the danger to define culture in terms of men's achievements. In order to rewrite literary history, the editors call on other scholars to jettison traditional definitions and categories.

In her essay "Domestic Blitz: A Revisionist History of the Fifties" Gaile McGregor agrees with Kaledin that the fifties in many ways anticipated and even made inevitable the turmoil of the following decades.⁵⁷ Referring to Graebner's or May's studies, McGregor also emphasizes the fractured character of a time which functioned as a bridge between the extremes of the forties and the excesses of the sixties. Basically, McGregor does not doubt the conformist nature of the postwar decade, but instead of self-satisfaction and content, she discovers uncertainties and uneasiness beneath the purportedly general conformity. Central to her understanding of fifties culture and society is its ambivalence about femininity. To comprehend the cultural revalorization of the "feminine" and the social debasement of women, McGregor turns to the family and examines in which ways films (re)presented a shift

⁵⁵ Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung (eds.). *Women and War. The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s*. New York, Oxford, Munich: Berg, 1990.

⁵⁶ Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. "Introduction". *Women and War. The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s*. New York, Oxford, Munich: Berg, 1990. 11.

⁵⁷ Gaile McGregor. "Domestic Blitz: A Revisionist History of the Fifties". *American Studies*. 34.1 (Spring 1993): 5-33

in gender roles and gender relationships. It is crucial for her that culture is not simply an imitation of life, but that it works as a mediator between different social realities.

Interestingly, the paternal values and roles usually associated with the postwar decade do not exist in fifties' film melodrama or on television. A negative image of fathers, McGregor argues, was a necessary precondition for "a more positive counter-ideology privileging the feminine."⁵⁸ This does not mean that women's roles gained importance. On the contrary, mothers in films vanished during that time. But while McGregor diagnoses a system of women's disempowerment, she determines at the same time a promotion of women's mainly biological "properties"⁵⁹ which she interprets as a formal opposition to patriarchy. McGregor is far from transforming the conservative character of the fifties into a progressive one. The fact that repressive notions of femininity - which also resulted in a recommodification of women's bodies - thrived during that era is a reaction to women's wartime independence and an attempt to restore traditional gender correlations. In other words, the return to traditional images of femininity was a response to diminishing male authority. By analyzing gender representations McGregor aims at showing that cultural images do not necessarily mirror lives and experiences, but that they reproduce them in a distorted way. She goes even further by implying that cultural phenomena produce "effects", that is that culture constructs reality.

What is outlined here is a new way of seeing the postwar decade which, according to McGregor, was essentially shaped by changing gender relationships. In contrast to Jackson Lears, she regards neither the fascination with the rebellious rock 'n roll anti-hero nor the rejection of patriarchal authority and the revalorization of "the feminine" as an expression of an augmenting subculture. Rather she views it as cultural adjustment to shifting relations of power. Even though the picture of gender roles that McGregor sketches is fragmented by ambiguities and contradictions, it significantly revises the image of unbroken male domination. Her portrayal of the dis-identification with the father and the overvaluation of "feminine" qualities blurs the picture of overwhelming patriarchy and underscores instead trends of realignment with values usually assigned to women.⁶⁰ From a feminist point of view, McGregor

⁵⁸ McGregor, "Domestic Blitz", 16.

⁵⁹ McGregor, "Domestic Blitz", 21.

⁶⁰ In her paper "'Fraternalization, Feminization, and Foreign Affairs': American Soldiers and German Women, 1945-1949", Petra Gödde shows how the infusion of American society with values more conventionally attributed to women even informed the aims and structure of American foreign affairs.

observes, the revalorization of feminineness was not perforce positive and empowering, largely because it implied an essentialist view of inherent feminine characteristics.

McGregor's study deserves particular attention because it does not position and examine post-World War II women in a social and cultural vacuum. Instead it perceives the transformation of women's roles and images in its social context, that is less in opposition to and more in connection with men's. It deviates in a basic way from a linear understanding of history which tends to ignore differences. Although the fifties are characterized as a clear successor of the forties and a definite precursor of the sixties, the era disproves assumptions of progression and consecutive development. McGregor's reading recognizes the complex gendered nature of American culture which cannot be imagined as a series of continuous stages, but rather as a constant struggle to negotiate gender roles.

What distinguishes these three texts from the majority of studies of postwar culture is obviously the degree to which gender and gender relations are seen as structural categories, the degree to which women are considered agents of social change, and finally the degree to which they scrutinize the interconnectedness of gender and other explicators for difference. Yet, it is particularly this last consideration that influences the three texts to a different extent. While Kaledin, Diedrich and Fischer-Hornung carefully define race as another decisive category, McGregor objects to what she calls grass-roots plurality because the emphasis upon difference obscures the view of the whole historical and cultural picture.⁶¹ Without claiming to "tell . . . the whole or the real or the only story possible,"⁶² McGregor nevertheless considers her essay provocative in that it places gender exclusively at the center of our historical understanding. Her deliberate concentration on gender in turn makes her revision more radical and consistent, but it also sacrifices differences among women to simplifying generalizations. She condenses the experiences of most diverse women into one common denominator - their gender. Such a reduction ignores that women are not universally the same and that unequal relations of power are governed by gender as well as by race, class, sexuality and other factors.

Paper presented at the 21st Annual Conference of the German Studies Association, Washington, D.C., 25-28 September 1997.

⁶¹ McGregor, "Domestic Blitz", 6.

⁶² McGregor, "Domestic Blitz", 6.

If both *Mothers and More* and *Women and War* use race as an analytical category, they use it necessarily in different ways. As single author, Kaledin's position is more advantageous, because it is possible for her to clearly enunciate her theoretical program. However, Kaledin's stance becomes more obvious in her methodology than in her introductory preface and employs direct historical account to tell the story of American women in the 1950s. Even though her focus is predominantly on middle-class women, there is an obvious effort in *Mothers and More* to consider race and class differences among women. Kaledin does so mainly by exploring African American women's experiences and culture and it is notable that she reinforces the trend within feminist studies to understand race as synonymous with blackness. Furthermore, it is most debatable whether Black women and culture should be seen as an isolated entity, as "the other" against which the dominant white culture is defined. Cultural studies should both address African American culture as an integral part of general American culture and insist on the reciprocity of and the power structures between the various American cultures.⁶³

The authors in *Women and War* are more alert to the ways in which gender and other forms of social determination intersect. The editors' exhortation that "the aspect of gender . . . must be complemented by those of class and ethnicity"⁶⁴ is programmatic for most contributors. The interaction of gender, ethnicity and class is highlighted in Maddalena Tirabassi's essay on Italian immigrant women; Ekaterini Georgoudaki situates Lillian Hellman's approach to women in the context of middle-class and upper-middle-class concerns; Maria Diedrich's study of Gertrude Stein considers the author's religion and homosexuality; and Paola Boi, Nellie McKay and H el ene Christol center on Zora Neale Hurston's, Ann Petry's and Paule Marshall's perception of black women's experiences. But even some of these works reject the reading of African American women's texts as a universal call for black sisterhood and reveal the differences and dynamics within one ethnic community. Thus, the multiplicity of voices calls attention to the social position of each writer and "brings to light a complexity that defies the narrow perspectives of the consensus approach."⁶⁵

In conclusion, the sensitivity to distinctions of gender and other social determinants that these three studies evince, yields important insights into postwar culture and

⁶³ Kaledin dedicates a separate chapter to African American women's achievements, but she intermittently mentions them in other chapters, too.

⁶⁴ Diedrich and Fischer-Hornung, "Introduction", 9.

⁶⁵ Diedrich and Fischer-Hornung, "Introduction", 10.

history. By foregrounding gender as a category of analysis, they indict and counterbalance the cardinal omissions of “malestream” cultural studies: they center women’s texts, document women’s cultural and historical agency, interlink gender, race and other markers of difference, and finally they question or reorganize the established cultural canon. Yet the general scarcity of publications which examine how non-white and non-middle-class women corroborated and reworked prevalent gender ideals urgently calls for further study in order to fill this gap.

2.3. Summary

The analysis and interpretation of the postwar period has undergone important developments among historians of women and cultural critics. However fruitful the renewed interest of historical and cultural studies to the postwar era has been, it has also become clear that there are still unexplored fields against which the findings of these approaches are to be tested. Any discussion of postwar America, women of color and cultural products must begin by repudiating the notion that these three fields are entirely independent, discrete entities. To state the obvious, the American people in the decade after World War II did not exclusively consist of male, heterosexual middle class whites. The history and cultural practices of those who did not fit this description also belong to that time. In what follows I will adopt from women’s historians the approach to that era via the focus on the much insisted upon domestic ideal and link it with the claim of cultural studies that postwar culture consists of a myriad of simultaneous experiences and stories. Starting from the assumption that the constraints of the postwar period and the existence of the ideology of domesticity cannot be wholly denied, the following chapters locate the position of women of color within those social institutions and discourses that were important sites for negotiating power within society. I want to examine the relevance and strength of these currents by shifting the focus to several population groups which have obviously been underresearched. Therefore in my own investigation of the period, I will sketch the contours of the postwar debate on femininity which pervaded American cultural consciousness and affected minority women’s self-representations and representations of society. To analyze these representations, it is necessary to find a conceptual framework which will allow for understanding the

experiences of a variety of women and recognizing their scope of action without denying the existence of structures of domination and subordination.

3. Structural Sources of Social Diversity

This chapter deals with the major developments in American political, economic and social life between 1945 and 1960 as far as they pertain to the daily living of women of color.⁶⁶ Because their existence was linked to that of their communities and cannot be separated from the larger historical context in which both were rooted, this survey also encompasses the developments in minority women's direct environment. This chapter is organized firstly by topic and secondly by population group in order to present the unique structural conditions within which the diverse activities of women can be placed. Despite significant differences, there were important similarities in the situation of Mexican American, African American and Asian American groups. Each was placed in a separate legal category from whites, excluded from rights and protections accorded full citizens. This profoundly restricted their possibility to organize, compete for jobs and acquire capital. The exploration of heterogeneous groups of women, which were all affected to varying degrees by discriminatory practices, illuminates the different relation of each group to the political, economic and social system. At this point it is appropriate to mention that it may be feasible to differentiate more than I have done and to consider the disparities caused by the composition, migration status, place of residence, region, occupation and other factors affecting the population. However, this exploration is beyond the scope of this chapter. The central question of this chapter coheres around the function of institutions in keeping social control and preserving societal structures. My goal is to lay out the institutional relevance in regulating unequal, hierarchical power relations and supporting systems of domination in postwar America. Entwined with this goal is the second aim to uncover how women of color were affected by and how they dealt with these political, economic and social conditions.

⁶⁶ The enterprise of this chapter, the investigation of the material realities of minority women's lives, is not without risks insofar as it uses categories of social difference and therefore to some degree essentializes them and naturalizes social hierarchies. This is perhaps exemplified best by the category of race whose very existence has been completely disproved by research in biology and genetics. As these categories are so much a part of our social system it seems futile to argue for their expulsion. Given the overall presence and meaning of these categories, it appears to be more useful to explore how these categories served to demarcate a group's location in society.

3.1. Women of Color and the State

To a considerable extent, the position of women of color in the postwar decades was connected to developments, events and decisions in the political and legislative arena. After 1945 the American government confronted various critical questions which partly resulted from great demographic and social changes. Accelerating urbanization and migration, a changing position of women, and an intensified self-confidence among African Americans: all these factors generated problems and conflicts and called for political intervention and solution. Women's strategies and efforts to deal with specific grievances in their communities were often "survival oriented" and concerned with, to a large degree, the area of discriminatory policies and the improvement of living conditions.

3.1.1. Immigration, Deportation and Displacement: Mexican American Women in a Hostile Environment

Several interrelated developments in American postwar politics had a deep impact on the life of the Mexican community. War-time contracts with Mexico guaranteed the availability of limited numbers of Mexican workers in case of labor shortages in the United States until the mid-1960s. In fact, despite the restrictions in immigration figures, different push-pull factors contributed to a massive legal and undocumented migration north. American employers soon welcomed the unending supply of cheap workers, and they rarely cared if the applicants arrived with or without a work visa. In contrast to farmers and their influential allies, officials, politicians and the press expressed a growing resentment toward Mexican immigration. Mexican Americans felt the full force of anti-Mexican agitation which, reinforced by the postwar anticommunist scare, reached its climax in the mass deportations in the 1950s.

The legislative foundation of the deportation practices of the 1950s made Mexican Americans eminently vulnerable, although the laws were not specifically aimed at people of Mexican origin. The McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 justified the deportation of "suspect" naturalized citizens, immigrants and aliens, and granted the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) the power to

search and arrest those whom the INS believed to be illegal.⁶⁷ 1950s statistics prove that the deportation of Mexican Americans was not only meant as abstract intimidation but represented a common practice: 875,000 deportations in 1953; 1,035,282 in 1954; 256,290 in 1955 and 90,122 in 1956.⁶⁸ The INS continually violated human rights and many politically active Mexicans or naturalized Americans were subjected to raids, harassment and arrests by the INS.

Indignant at postwar discrimination, Mexican American women played a significant role in mobilizing their community. Daily survival was endangered by poor living conditions, depressed wages, segregation and police repression.⁶⁹ Contrary to their image as entirely apolitical and domestic women, they engaged in the many Mexican American organizations, groups and unions to advocate for social and political change. The union institutions of the 1940s and the 1950s especially served as a platform to popularize both conventional women's and progressive issues like health, education, voter registration and women's rights. Several active Mexican American women distinguished themselves by their charisma and stamina in important strikes in the postwar decade.⁷⁰ According to postwar anticommunist sentiments, union activism equaled subversive activism, and therefore Mexican American women activists were constantly imperiled by being labeled "un-American". The fate of the actress Rosaura Revueltas, who starred in the famous and blacklisted movie *Salt of the Earth*⁷¹, makes clear that Mexican American women engaged in labor issues risked more than harassment and exclusion from their profession by government ruling: Revueltas was arrested and deported for her allegedly subversive activities.⁷²

Mexican American life was threatened by other developments. The government clearly expressed their disdain and disregard for this population with the urban removal procedures in the late Eisenhower years. The neutral term "urban removal"

⁶⁷ Rodolfo Acuña. *Occupied America. A History of Chicanos*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.159ff.

⁶⁸ Some historians have doubted the accuracy of these low figures because they are partly based on estimates of the INS. Acuña, *Occupied America*, 157. See also Juan Ramón García. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954. Contributions in Ethnic Studies 2*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980.

⁶⁹ On police brutality, see Acuña, *Occupied America*, 332-337.

⁷⁰ Margaret Rose. "Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican American Barrios in California. The Community Service Organization, 1947-1962". *Not June Cleaver. Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 177-200; Acuña, *Occupied America*, 261f.

⁷¹ Michael Wilson. *Salt of the Earth*. With Commentary by Deborah Silverton Rosenfeldt. Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1978.

⁷² Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei. *Race, Gender, and Work. A Multicultural History of Women in the United States*. Boston: South End Press, 1991. 81.

masked an inhumane program which benefited real estate, financial and political interests. In order to realize plans for highway clearance, business expansion and public development, hundreds of thousands of minority people were displaced. Several reasons contributed to a complex machinery which pressurized them into leaving their homes, if necessary by force. Those sections in which mostly low-wage earners had settled were regarded as expendable and the presence of minorities was considered detrimental to business. The development of the barrio areas promised huge profits. Mexican Americans had no political lobby.⁷³ Petitions which activists María Durán Lang and Henrietta Villaescusa helped circulate to secure protection for the lives, welfare and property of the barrio residents could not arouse enough public support expressing disapproval to stop the displacements.⁷⁴ By removing the barrios, politicians deliberately risked the political and economic base of the Mexican American as well as African American communities.

3.1.2. Segregation and Discrimination: African American Women Organizing Resistance

Although only few political gains of the Roosevelt administration during World War II continued after 1945, some developments fostered a restrained optimism among African Americans. The domestic policy of Roosevelt's successor Truman was ambiguous: on the one hand he decidedly advocated civil rights, but on the other he did not yield to requests by women's pressure groups like the YWCA to establish a successor to the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which had been an occasionally effective agency to encounter discrimination in defense industries.⁷⁵ The confidence of African Americans in the immediate postwar years had apparently less to do with government action and more with decreasing unemployment rates, rising income levels and growing participation in labor unions. Eisenhower's election in

⁷³ Acuña, *Occupied America*, 339.

⁷⁴ Rose, "Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican American Barrios", 193.

⁷⁵ By the late 1940s, the YWCA was a multiracial organization, although local meetings were often racially segregated. Besides the establishment of a permanent FEPC, they pursued antilynching legislation and abolition of the poll tax. Susan Lynn. "Gender and Progressive Politics: A Bridge to Social Activism of the 1960s". *Not June Cleaver. Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 112; Neil A. Wynn. *The Afro-American and the Second World War*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976. 48-55, 122f. See also Karen Anderson. *Changing Woman. A History of Racial Ethnic Women in Modern America*. New York,

1952 marked the end of federal pressure for the time being - however weak it had been - and employers promptly returned to segregationist prewar strategies.

But time could not be turned back as far as the political and social consciousness of African Americans was concerned, and more systematically, energetically and courageously than ever before, they began to organize collective resistance against racism and discrimination. As historian Karen Anderson formulates, black women “marched, lobbied, picketed, and litigated in order to secure the dignity, rights and opportunities accorded to others.”⁷⁶ Very soon they realized that within this range of protest forms, lawsuits were the most promising medium, and the Supreme Court the most reliable ally.⁷⁷ The groundwork of later decisions had already been laid with two court cases: the *Mitchell v. US* case (1941), which had guaranteed black first-class passengers the same treatment as whites, and the *Smith v. Allwright* case (1944). Here, the Supreme Court had outlawed the all-white primary, which had been an effective device to withhold blacks from the vote in the South. Yet other legal and extralegal barriers continued to exist, so that still in 1952, 87 percent of African American women compared to 65 percent of men had never voted before.⁷⁸ With their engagement in the political arena, courageous and dedicated African American women actively worked for political change, attempted to influence public policy decisions and contributed to the success of the civil rights movement.

Despite the reliance on the engagement of men and women, the growing southern civil rights movement increasingly came to depend on the participation of African American women.⁷⁹ Particularly at the local level, they emerged as leaders of civil rights groups, merging their experiences from community and religious activism with political consciousness and strategies. One of the most prominent figures was Rosa Parks who became secretary of the local NAACP in Montgomery and who sparked the bus boycott in 1955.⁸⁰ But other women moved into important positions in the 1940s and 1950s as well. Ruby Hurley had become youth director of the NAACP in

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 189f and Jacqueline Jones. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women and Work from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1985. 233f.

⁷⁶ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 208.

⁷⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 267.

⁷⁸ Hartmann, *The Home-Front and Beyond*, 124.

⁷⁹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 280.

⁸⁰ In contrast to the widespread media depictions which explained Park's refusal to move to the back of the bus with her physical exhaustion, the catalytic moment itself and the boycott had been carefully planned by local women activists. Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 174f. See also the detailed account in Paula Giddings. *When and Where I Enter. The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow, 1984. 261-267.

1943. Ella Baker, who had become national director of branches for the NAACP in 1943, was appointed coordinator of the Atlanta office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, and was chief advisor to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1960 to 1964. Daisy Bates was the president of the local NAACP in Little Rock, Arkansas.⁸¹ According to Eugenia Kaledin, “by 1959, one out of ten branch presidents (108) of the NAACP and more than 50 percent (669) of the branch secretaries were women.”⁸²

Even though African American women did not battle separately from men, they pushed for gender equity and fought for a politics that also addressed black women’s unique needs and difficulties. They worried over the chances black women had in the postwar economy. They organized training centers, placement services and support groups with the intention of raising the prestige of domestic service, keeping the wages high and improving poor working conditions.⁸³

Another urgent issue that was addressed by women activists and, albeit in different ways, by policymakers and politicians, was the black single mother. Demographic data show that in 1950, the fertility rates of blacks were 33 percent higher than those of whites, that 25.3 percent of all black wives were separated, divorced or widowed in comparison with 10 percent of white women, and that 40 percent of these (black and white) women headed households with children.⁸⁴ The difficulties these women had to face in combining paid work with child rearing and domestic work are reflected in the number of African American women who applied for financial assistance from the state. In the 1940s, unmarried mothers and their families became eligible for public support for the first time.⁸⁵ But because of institutionalized prejudices and in contrast to many white women obtaining public assistance, black women rarely had access to welfare.⁸⁶ The fear that black fertility and illegitimacy would increase welfare costs resulted in diverse discriminatory rules in individual states. In the North, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC) was administered less restrictively than in the South. Whether African American women in the rural areas received support or not was usually dependent on the labor demand during harvest season. Here

⁸¹ Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*, 124f.

⁸² Kaledin, *Mothers and More*, 153.

⁸³ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 258f.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 263.

⁸⁵ Kunzel, “White Neurosis, Black Pathology”, 321.

southern politicians had launched a vendetta against black welfare mothers, especially those with illegitimate children. By invoking deeply rooted stereotypes associating black women with profligate sexuality, reproductive excess, and economic parasitism, these politicians sought ... to renounce public responsibility for impoverished African American women and children. . . .⁸⁷

In the context of a pathologization of black single motherhood, public criticism was increasingly directed toward the matriarchal and “disorganized” structures of African American families. These clearly contradicted the postwar ideals of a “normal”, that is white, middle-class and male-headed family. Not surprisingly, the “dysfunctional” black family became a politically contested terrain at a time when the family was glorified as the archetype of a free society.⁸⁸

3.1.3 Asian American Women in the Middle of International Conflicts

Principally the notion of “Asian” groups suggests a cultural and historical homogeneity which in fact has never existed. Asian groups in the postwar years included women of diverse nationalities and backgrounds of which Chinese and Japanese were both the largest and the longest established groups residing in the United States. What these two groups had in common was that both were subject to discriminatory immigration policies which left permanent marks on their histories.

In 1940, 77,504 Chinese resided in the US, a rather small number resulting from prevalent anti-Chinese sentiments and rigid immigration restrictions for the Chinese. The Chinese American alliance during the war had culminated in the rescindation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the establishment of a racial quota system for Chinese immigration. Because this quota allowed only 105 Chinese per year to immigrate, the growth of population under this law was rather small.⁸⁹ Still a much larger number of Chinese women actually entered the US in the postwar era. They immigrated on the basis of the 1945 War Bride Act which enabled foreign brides of US servicemen to circumvent restrictive immigration quotas. Initially excluding veterans of Asian ancestry, the War Bride Act was amended in 1947 to include

⁸⁶ Kunzel, “White Neurosis, Black Pathology”, 321. See also Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 197; and Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 263.

⁸⁷ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 198.

⁸⁸ Kunzel, “White Neurosis, Black Pathology”, 321.

⁸⁹ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 209.

them.⁹⁰ Until 1949, when the law expired, many Chinese American men sped to China to marry there. Chinese women actually were the main group admitted under this law as non-quota immigrants. Another group of Chinese women entered the United States under the 1946 Alien Fiancées and Fiancés Act which allowed the Chinese spouse-to-be of US citizens to immigrate on a non-quota basis.⁹¹ Both acts particularly promoted the entry of women who would have been barred from immigration without these acts. Between 1947 and 1952, women constituted almost 90 percent of the Chinese entries and thus contributed to the normalization of the male-female ratio of the Chinese population, which dropped from 295:100 in 1940 to 133:100 in 1960.⁹² The arrival of women changed the Chinese bachelor societies into more sex-balanced communities and initiated radical transformations in social, economic and cultural patterns. Reunited families, instead of male partners, opened small-scale businesses which required minimum capitalization and supreme efforts. They represented a new type of family which carried different meanings for Chinese women. Some suffered from isolation and overwork while others experienced a new freedom.⁹³

At the point of entry, Chinese women were detained and closely interrogated on Angel Island. Not until two suicides and a hungerstrike of Chinese women detainees did the INS react to much unfavorable publicity and pressure by determining the applicant's right to immigrate upon departure instead of upon arrival.⁹⁴

A last group of Chinese women immigrants who came to the US in the 1950s signaled the changing political climate. After the communist revolution in 1949, 5,000 Chinese students studying in American colleges and universities at the time, were granted political asylum. Among them was Dr. Chien-Hsiung Wu, a top-ranking experimental physicist and the first woman to receive an honorary degree of Doctor of Science by Princeton in 1958.⁹⁵ Under the 1948 Displaced Persons Act and the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, another 3,000 anticommunist academics, professionals and intellectuals were admitted, and enriched American science and technology. According to historian Xiaolan Bao, the 1953 act especially "provided women with

⁹⁰ Sucheng Chan. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991. 40.

⁹¹ Xiaolan Bao. "When Women Arrived: The Transformation of New York's Chinatown". *Not June Cleaver. Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 20.

⁹² Shien-woo Kung. *Chinese in American Life*. 1962. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973. 33.

⁹³ Bao, "When Women Arrived", 24-30.

⁹⁴ Yen Le Espiritu. *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1997. 55.

opportunities for immigration by reserving a number of visas for Chinese refugees and their families, including those already 'stranded' in the United States, to 'escape' from the communist government in China."⁹⁶ The Sputnik satellite that the Soviet Union launched into space in 1957 incited the race for knowledge and led to a heightened interest in Chinese engineers.⁹⁷

At the same time that the government hailed scholars and scientists, the treatment and perception of the Chinese in general turned hostile. As communist China became the demonized enemy, a new tide of anti-Chinese actions swept across the land. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under Edgar Hoover spied upon persons of Chinese ancestry while the INS endeavored to exclude, deport and denaturalize "suspect" Chinese American citizens.⁹⁸ Although the rate of deportation increased after the war compared with Mexican exclusion, the figure of Chinese exclusion was small: 1,340 deportations between 1946 and 1960.⁹⁹

Japanese American women entered the postwar period carrying the severe psychological burden of concentration camp experiences. In December 1944, the Supreme Court decided that the indefinite detainment of loyal US citizens against their will was unconstitutional and that the practice of Japanese American internment had no legal basis.¹⁰⁰ In the same month the War Department ended the exclusion of Japanese and Japanese Americans from the West Coast, but in August 1945 over 40,000 individuals of Japanese ancestry still lived in camps.¹⁰¹ Most of them were completely uprooted and at a loss as to where to go and what to do: they had lost their farms, property and savings. Over 20,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans received financial compensation for psychological and economic devastation, but many who could not prove their losses with the necessary documents either failed to file claims or were refused compensation when they did. The sum of \$38 million which Congress appropriated for the settlement of evacuation claims was a tenth of what numerous estimates deemed necessary.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Kung, *Chinese in American Life*, 238ff.

⁹⁶ Bao, "When Women Arrived", 20.

⁹⁷ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 141.

⁹⁸ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 141.

⁹⁹ Calculated from Kung, *Chinese in American Life*, 125.

¹⁰⁰ Roger Daniels. *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988. 280.

¹⁰¹ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 139.

¹⁰² Hartmann, *The Home-Front and Beyond*, 126. According to historian Valerie Matsumoto a recent study has supported the later assessment by estimating that Japanese Americans lost between \$149 million and \$375 million in 1945 dollars. Valerie Matsumoto. "Nisei Women During World War II".

The number of persons of Japanese ancestry who were deported in 1945-46, 4,724, discloses that deportation was a continual danger for Japanese and Japanese Americans in the immediate postwar years as well.¹⁰³ One of the most tragic examples of Japanese American women who were threatened with deportation was Iva Ikuko Toguri. Her case exemplifies how a Japanese American woman could become the victim of international politics combined with stereotypical images of Asian women. In 1948, Iva Toguri was charged with treason. After a trial laden with irregularities and injustices, she lost her American citizenship and the all-white jury sentenced her to ten years in prison and a \$10,000 fine in 1949. After her release from prison six years later the INS declared her an “undesirable alien” and therefore deportable under the McCarran-Walter Act. Iva Toguri successfully defended herself and in 1958 her deportation was canceled, because the INS declared to have nowhere to deport her to.¹⁰⁴

For Japanese Americans, the beginning of the Cold War had a most concrete meaning. Japan developed into the most important ally in eastern Asia and harassment and discrimination gave way to less hostile treatment. As a consequence of the changing atmosphere, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) succeeded in modifying the repressive nature of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act. As a result, it included an immigration quota and made Japanese Americans eligible for naturalization. This measure also mooted the Alien Land Law from 1913 which prevented immigrant Asians from owning land.¹⁰⁵

Until 1952, Asians had been denied both immigration rights and acquisition of citizenship through naturalization, but the McCarran-Walter Act enabled 185 persons of Japanese ancestry per year to come to the US. Half of the quota was reserved for professionals, disclosing immigration as a highly selective procedure which favored skilled and educated aliens.¹⁰⁶ Like Chinese women, some Japanese women utilized the War Bride Act and the Fiancées Act to skirt debarring immigration policies. Unlike Chinese women, the large majority of Japanese immigrant women was married to non-Asian men, whom they had met during the American occupation. Therefore they

Women and War. Ed. Nancy F. Cott. *History of Women in the United States. Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities* 15. Munich: K. G. Saur, 1993. 462.

¹⁰³ Raymond Okamura. “Iva Ikuko Toguri: Victim of an American Fantasy”. *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*. Ed. Emma Gee. Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1976. 90 and Robert A. Wilson and Bill Hosokawa. *East to America. A History of the Japanese in the United States*. New York: William Morrow, 1980. 297f.

¹⁰⁴ Okamura, “Iva Ikuko Toguri”, 86-96.

¹⁰⁵ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 142 and Wilson and Hosokawa, *East to America*, 286.

entered the US under the McCarran-Walter-Act as non-quota persons. During the 1950s, 80 percent of all quota and non-quota Japanese immigrants were women and almost all of the annual 2,000 to 5,000 women were wives of US citizens.¹⁰⁷ Marriages to white Americans were more common among Japanese than among Chinese women, and sociologists have stressed both the social ambitions of Japanese women and their dissatisfaction with the Japanese patriarchal system. In many US states however, intermarriage was not legal. Until the 1960s, almost all southern states had anti-miscegenation statutes, except California where the anti-miscegenation law was nullified in 1948.¹⁰⁸

3.2. Women of Color in the Labor Market

Labor structures have always been at the core of social inequalities. The job market is a place which assigns women a location according to specific social characteristics. The segmentation along lines of gender, race and class in turn affirms and stabilizes those categories along which women of color are positioned in the economy and society. As a result, hierarchies in the labor system are maintained and particular group features become a self-evident explanation for the marginal, disadvantaged position of these workers in the occupational structure. Because employment patterns interlock with social, hierarchically ordered attributes, the history of postwar labor arrangements reveals structures that have significant effects on women's economic mobility, on their social standing and, last but not least, on their (self-) perceptions.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Kung, *Chinese in American Life*, 109.

¹⁰⁷ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Kung, *Chinese in American Life*, 214f. On outmarriages of Japanese women, see John N. Tinker. "Intermarriage and Ethnic Boundaries: The Japanese American Case". *The Journal of Social Issues* 29.2 (1973): 49-66; Akemi Kikumura and Harry G. Kitano. "Interracial Marriage: A Picture of Japanese Americans". *The Journal of Social Issues* 29.2 (1973): 67-81 and Gerald J. Schnepf and Agnes Masaku Yui. "Cultural and Marital Adjustment of Japanese War Brides". *The American Journal of Sociology* 61.1 (July 1955): 48-50.

¹⁰⁹ A statistical comment is necessary. The Statistical Abstracts of the United States usually distinguishes between two different groups: white and nonwhite. In 1950, 95.5 percent of the nonwhite population was made up by African Americans, 0.9 percent by Japanese and 0.8 percent by Chinese. Only the decennial census gives exact social and economic data of the different nonwhite groups which were subdivided into Negro, Indian, Japanese, Chinese and all other population groups. In the late 1940s, Mexican Americans demanded to be classified as white in public statistics, because they hoped that would improve their status. Therefore individuals of Mexican ancestry were included in the white population unless they were definitely Black or Indian. This classification was in use until the 1980 census. On terminology, cf. Mary Romero. "Introduction". *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring*

3.2.1. Persistent Marginality of Mexican American Women Workers

The most enduring and momentous World War II arrangement which affected the socioeconomic position of Mexican men and women was the establishment of the Bracero program which lasted from 1942 to 1964. As a governmental response to labor shortages, the Bracero program was an agreement with Mexico which allowed a limited number of Mexicans to work in the United States and guaranteed them a certain amount of legal protection. Despite the protective regulations, such as round trip transportation, housing measures, minimum wages and anti-discrimination provisions, employers often circumvented these bilateral agreements.¹¹⁰ For them, the Bracero program proved to be most advantageous, firstly because they had recourse to a reserve army of workers in times of labor shortages, secondly because they could exert effective control over labor unrest, and thirdly because surplus and cheap Mexican labor kept the wage average generally low.¹¹¹

Between 1946 and 1959 more than 3 million Mexican people came to the United States under contract.¹¹² In the first years, mainly male, unattached Mexicans crossed the border to find the promised better work as miners or railroad workers, but most of them were employed as fieldworkers.¹¹³ As migration patterns changed, families and even single Mexican women joined the trek north.

Because the Bracero program was predominantly intended to recruit male workers, documented Mexican women entered the United States in smaller numbers, most of whom found seasonal and transitory jobs in agriculture.¹¹⁴ However, organizational and technological changes in agribusiness as well as growing opposition to the Bracero program in the mid-1950s further decreased the demand for women fieldworkers and only a few remained there. The percentage of employed southwestern Mexican American women working on farms declined from

Latina and Latino Lives in the U. S. Eds. Mary Romero, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotela and Vilma Ortiz. New York, London: Routledge, XIII-XIX.

¹¹⁰ Alfredo Mirandé. *The Chicano Experience: An Alternative Perspective*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985. 54f; Acuña, *Occupied America*, 144-150.

¹¹¹ In contrast to the nationwide average of \$2.45 per hundredweight of cotton picked, Mexicans in Texas earned between \$0.50 and \$1.25 in 1950. Acuña, *Occupied America*, 264.

¹¹² Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore and Ralph C. Guzmán. *The Mexican American People. Nation's Second Largest Minority*. New York: Free Press, 1970. 68.

¹¹³ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 79.

¹¹⁴ Immigration data suggest that between 1942 and 1947 Mexican women were not admitted into the US in order to follow their husbands. As a consequence women constituted a large part of the illegal migrants. Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 113, 120.

21 percent in 1930 to 6 percent in 1950.¹¹⁵ But even the less competitive situation did not change exploitive wages or bad working conditions. Mexican American women workers were still not liable for minimum wage legislation and often earned less than the agreed upon wage minimum of 30 cents which was prescribed for their male fellow-workers.¹¹⁶

Two postwar trends eminently shaped the patterns of Mexican American women's employment: exploding numbers of migrants and urbanization. In 1948, after unsuccessful wage negotiations between the United States and Mexico and the latter's threat to discontinue the Bracero program, the US opened the border. While the number of documented workers alone increased from 35,345 in 1948 to 107,000 in 1949, the influx of undocumented immigrants also dramatically accelerated¹¹⁷. Experts estimate that the proportion of migrants with legal work permits to those without labor certification was at least one to four.¹¹⁸ The flow of employment-searching migrants and the loss of jobs in agriculture funneled many Mexican American women into other low-wage segments and heightened the tensions on the overconcentrated labor market. According to Anderson, the consequences of the labor surplus were exceptionally palpable in female-dominated factory and service work.¹¹⁹

That those sectors which absorbed Mexican American women workers were more often than not located in the barrio economy refers to a second demographic development which was of importance for the employment experiences of Hispanic women¹²⁰. By the early 1950s, the Mexican American population had become primarily urban. The pull toward the cities had different reasons: "declining demand for migrant workers, the widening of the income gap between rural and urban workers, increasing opportunities for urban employment, . . . access to public assistance, and . . . the presence of kin who had already settled."¹²¹ Although opportunities grew more for men than for women, the employment rate of Hispanic

¹¹⁵ Vicki L Ruiz. "'And Miles to Go ...': Mexican Women and Work, 1930-1985". *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*. Eds. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz and Janice Monk. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988. 118.

¹¹⁶ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 113.

¹¹⁷ On the motivation and situation of undocumented persons, see García, *Operation Wetback*, 139-156.

¹¹⁸ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 80. See also Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera. *The Chicanos. A History of Mexican Americans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 220.

¹¹⁹ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 127.

¹²⁰ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 113.

¹²¹ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 126.

women noticeably increased from 22 percent in 1950 to 29 percent in 1960¹²². Postwar urbanization brought about shifts not only in Mexican American women's labor force participation, but also in the occupational distribution. While employment in household services continued to decline from 33.1 percent in 1930 to 11.5 percent in 1960, Mexican American women moved into other areas. The kinds of jobs available for them were mainly in manufacturing and services. Employers found that frequently "the women were more adaptive to the urban industries such as clothing and food processing and were even more exploitable than Mexican men."¹²³ Historian Rodolfo Acuña astutely remarks that "without the Mexicanas' labor the expansion or even maintenance of the garment industry would have been retarded and the process of moving the industry to other nations would have been accelerated."¹²⁴ A moderate mobility was visible in the break into office and sales jobs: while in 1930 10.5 percent of Mexican American women were employed as clerical or sales workers, their representation grew to 23.9 percent in 1950 and 30 percent in 1960. In addition to discrimination in the labor market, a lack of formal schooling accounted for the tiny number of women who were able to find professional or managerial jobs in the primary sector of the labor market.¹²⁵

3.2.2. Progress and Deterioration: African American Women and Wage Labor

Until recently, historians have emphasized the economic advance of African American women in the postwar era. In fact, the socioeconomic situation of black women must be seen as a tangle of stagnation, absolute improvement and relative deterioration. For the majority of African American women the war did not bring diversified job opportunities because racial and sexual discrimination continued to permeate the labor market. Their participation remained constant (about 37 percent) between 1940 and 1950.¹²⁶ The few wartime gains began to evaporate and the gap between white and minority women started to widen once more. Even though the

¹²² Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 82.

¹²³ Acuña, *Occupied America*, 170.

¹²⁴ It was in the 1960s that garment industries were increasingly moved to countries with lowest production costs like Mexico, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea. Acuña, *Occupied America*, 170, 262.

¹²⁵ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 76; Chafe, *The American Woman*, 137-143; Mario Barrera. *Race and Class in the Southwest*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979. 140-145. The 1950 figure is for Mexican and Mexican American women workers in the Southwest only.

¹²⁶ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 262.

percentage of unemployed minority women rose as fast as that of their white counterparts from 1948 to 1958, they suffered joblessness in much higher proportions than white women.¹²⁷

The pace of northward, urban migration accelerated in the postwar decade so that the number of African Americans living in the South declined from 77 percent in 1940 to 60 percent in 1960. By that time, more than one third of all blacks lived in 24 metropolitan centers. Migration stimulated substantial shifts in the structures and conditions of black women's employment. The rising rate of migrants was mainly effected by three socioeconomic factors.¹²⁸

The most important push factor, which impelled large numbers of African Americans to migrate North, were discriminatory practices which were especially virulent in the South. Segregation in schools, housing and recreational facilities, lynching and disenfranchisement were a part of daily life in the South. Facing racist and sexist employment patterns in the South and hoping for wider opportunities in the North, many women sought to secure material stability and to improve their workplace status in Northern urban areas.

The second factor was closely related to the expanding postwar economy. African American women migrated to the North, because of better wages: "In 1959, southern Black family income was only 39 percent of white income, compared to 70 percent in the North."¹²⁹ Among African American women generally, the postwar decade was characterized by higher income. From 1950 to 1960, black women's median income jumped by 43 percent, while white women's median income only slightly increased by 3.7 percent. This meant a clear improvement in black women's income relative to that of whites: in 1950, the average African American woman worker earned half as much as her white coworker and by 1960, a black woman already received more than three-fifths the pay of white women.¹³⁰ In other words, although African American women workers still earned only a fraction of white women's salary, their marginal position seemed to change.

¹²⁷ While minority women's unemployment rate rose from 6.1 percent in 1948 to 10.8 in 1958, the rate of white women increased from 3.8 percent in 1948 to 6.2 percent in 1958. Reynolds Farley. "The Urbanization of Negroes in the United States". *Journal of Social History* 1.3 (Spring 1968): 255.

¹²⁸ 2.7 million African Americans left the South between 1940 and 1960 to join the movement to the industrial centers in the North, Midwest and West. See Philip M. Hauser. "Demographic Factors in the Integration of the Negro". *The Negro American*. Eds. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966. 76.

¹²⁹ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 174.

¹³⁰ Computed from Cynthia Murray Taeuber. *Statistical Handbook on Women in America*. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1991. 151f.

Thirdly, the mechanization of agricultural production in sectors like cotton picking rendered the tenant-farming system obsolete and drastically reduced the demand for labor throughout the 1950s. The remaining number of black male wage laborers outweighed that of women workers because rural employers preferred male workers. Therefore the share of African American women in agriculture decreased from 21.0 percent in 1940 to 8.7 percent in 1950, compared to men's share of 43.3 percent in 1940 and 24.6 percent in 1950.¹³¹ Those who continued to work in the sharecropping system for the most part had to contend with exhausted or poor soil. Mechanization also destroyed many home-based workplaces of black women in the rural laundering business. As southern industries could only compensate for a small number of jobs which had disappeared, unemployed African American women were either to rely on community solidarity, to apply for welfare or to migrate to the city to find a job outside the home.¹³² In contrast to the exodus of whites to the suburbs, blacks began to crowd in the cities. At the end of the 1950s three in four African Americans lived in urban areas.¹³³

For black women, postwar urbanization brought a break with former employment patterns. They were able, for the first time in larger numbers, to move out of agricultural and domestic work into some kinds of service or manual work.¹³⁴ Here African American women profited by the intensifying labor demand for women in professional services, sales and office work. The number of black women in domestic or personal service dropped from 64.6 percent in 1940 to 55.2 percent in 1952. Despite this decrease, African American women's representation increased proportionately because white women at the same vacated domestic service jobs.¹³⁵ Household work continued to be a key source of gainful employment for African American women. As a consequence of black women's growing dominance in this category of service, the status of this occupation did not improve. In 1950 private household work was still exempt from legal protection in the form of minimum wage

¹³¹ Department of Labor. *Negroes in the United States: Their Employment and Economic Status*. Bulletin 1119. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952. 43.

¹³² Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 191f and Jones, *Labor of Love. Labor of Sorrow*, 260f.

¹³³ In 1960, 73.2 percent of the African American population was urban. Farley, "The Urbanization of Negroes", 255.

¹³⁴ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 192. On the history and political consequences of African American women's work in the South, see Jacqueline Jones. "The political implications of Black and White Women's Work in the South, 1890-1965". *Women, Politics, and Change*. Eds. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990. 108-129.

¹³⁵ Department of Labor, *Negroes in the United States*, 43 and 45.

or hours legislation, unemployment compensation or social security of which only the latter was extended to domestics in the course of the 1950s.¹³⁶

Although their numbers remained small, a growing group of black women was able to capitalize on the persistent decline of white women in professional work in the postwar decade. Especially in typical women's professions like nursing, teaching and social work, African American women filled the positions left vacant by white women. Within four years, the share of black professional workers rose from 5.7 percent in 1948 to 7.0 percent in 1952.¹³⁷ Similarly, black women gained ground in high-paying jobs, but the numbers of those who reached upper income levels remained small.¹³⁸ Thus the employment pattern of black women in the labor market was characterized by a bimodal distribution, with a small and better educated group in professional categories and a large majority in service and non-farm areas.

3.2.3. Tangible Changes: Enlarging Employment Possibilities for Asian American Women

For Asians and Asian Americans, the postwar time was largely beneficial in economic terms. Labor market segments, which had only rarely employed them or offered them any kind of good position before, increasingly showed interest in engaging Chinese and Japanese. Asian American women benefited from the emergence of an urban industrial economy and other postwar developments, which created a mounting labor demand in high-wage semiskilled jobs¹³⁹. They utilized the

¹³⁶ Jones, *Labor of Love. Labor of Sorrow*, 257 and Department of Labor, Women's Bureau. *Handbook of Women Workers*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975. Domestic work has been recognized as being most restrictive to minority women's social and economic mobility. According to economist Bette Woody, domestic service "above all contrasted in its organization, which permitted enforcement of very low standards of pay, work content and exploitation of the worker. The system was ... extremely fragmented, consisting of individual employers who set rules on job content, work hours, pay, and benefits. ... Recent documentation has shown that it was generally the heaviest and dirtiest work ... and the hours and pay were at the mercy of employer-dominated negotiations." Bette Woody. *Black Women in the Workplace: Impacts of Structural Change in the Economy. Contributions in Women's Studies* 126. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992. 66. How reproductive labor supported the construction of race and gender is demonstrated in Evelyn Nakano Glenn's excellent study "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Dimension of Paid Reproductive Labor." *Signs*. 18.1 (Autumn 1992): 1-43.

¹³⁷ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 245f and Department of Labor, *Negroes in the United States*, 45.

¹³⁸ During this period, the percentage of African American women earning more than \$10,000 jumped from 4.4 to 7.5 percent. Computed from Taeuber, *Statistical Handbook*, 152.

¹³⁹ Historian Yen Le Espiritu mentions the build-up of infrastructure, the housing boom and postwar armament. Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 52.

widening opportunities and their share in the labor force enlarged: Japanese women's labor force participation rose from 42 percent in 1950 to 47 percent in 1960, and Chinese women's rate grew from 29 percent to 42 percent.¹⁴⁰

After the war, Japanese American women returned to a considerably changed way of life. The postwar era ended the segregation of Japanese residential areas. Farms and businesses had been destroyed or taken over by other groups, requiring geographic and economic reorientation of former internees. Therefore the concentration of Japanese American women in agriculture declined between 1930 and 1960 from 22.9 percent to 6.7 percent.¹⁴¹ Instead of crowding in ghettos again, they dispersed throughout the cities.

In addition to enforcing geographic mobility, the destruction of the home-based or community-based economy impelled many Japanese American women to search for work in the "general" economy, which was willing to open its doors a crack for Asian workers. The positions they commenced to fill reflected the expanding postwar economy. By 1950, 47 percent of Japanese American women workers were employed in sales, offices and operative occupations and only 10 percent in domestic service.¹⁴² On the labor market, there was even an explicit demand for Japanese American white-collar women workers in clerical and civil service, while Japanese American men had to wrestle more with racist hiring patterns in this field.

Whether they responded to growing opportunities, to the destruction of the family economy or whether they turned to work to restore the internment losses, the reasons for Japanese women's moving out of unpaid family labor were varied. The number of Japanese women not working outside the home dropped from 21 percent in 1940 to 7 percent in 1950.¹⁴³ Particularly for American-born Japanese women, the postwar labor market served as a port of entry to gainful employment. Public distrust and institutional discrimination subsided sufficiently to gain a foothold in occupational areas other than agriculture or domestic service.

Similar to Japanese American women, Chinese American women moved into "non-traditional" labor segments in sizable numbers, but since the Chinese community and their enterprises were less affected by the war, they remained more

¹⁴⁰ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 209 and Donald Warren Mar and M. Kim. "Historical Trends". *The State of Asian Pacific America: Economic Diversity, Issues, and Policies*. Ed. Paul Ong. Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and University of California at Los Angeles, Asian American Studies Center, 1994. 23.

¹⁴¹ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 220.

¹⁴² Matsumoto, "Japanese American Women During World War II", 458f.

concentrated in prewar occupations.¹⁴⁴ Women of Chinese ancestry can roughly be subdivided into two groups which showed differences in their origin, levels of education, socialization and employment possibilities. The majority of women came from rural areas in China and had little education, while some of the immigrants and an increasing number of US-born daughters had a high school education. Those who arrived with some formal education and a knowledge of English adapted more to American society and culture, and soon shifted from unpaid family work in the small producer household to better-paying jobs in the larger labor force. Between 1940 and 1950 the number of white-collar clerical workers more than quadrupled from 750 to 3,200 Chinese American women.¹⁴⁵ For many Chinese and Chinese American women, language barriers and cultural differences on the part of the average immigrant woman and prejudices on the part of the employers meant the continuation of low-paying restaurant, laundry and garment work. While the laundry business very slowly began to decline in the postwar decade, the garment industry, which had its origin in New York, also gained importance for women in Los Angeles and San Francisco. For them, work in garment factories and shops represented a possibility to overcome isolation and to contribute to meager family finances. In both Japanese and Chinese American families, the increasing parity in wages changed family dynamics and structures. By supplementing men's declining wages, the position of the women in the male-dominated families improved and endowed them with more self-confidence.¹⁴⁶

Although Chinese women's work provided an crucial source of income, this did not mean that they received adequate wages. In 1959, their earnings were still little more than one fourth of white women's earnings. Furthermore, many Chinese women still worked within the confines of Chinatown. Their jobs consisted of long work hours as well as backbreaking work and they were seldom protected by labor laws.¹⁴⁷ Increased competition or language difficulties prevented many women from fighting for higher wages or better working conditions, but women in San Francisco organized in the Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. This Union had been founded in 1937 as an affiliate of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union

¹⁴³ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 231.

¹⁴⁴ Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 53.

¹⁴⁵ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 122.

¹⁴⁶ See Matsumoto, "Japanese American Women During World War II", 462 and Zhou Min. *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992. 170.

¹⁴⁷ Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 212ff.

(ILGWU) to strike against the factory of the National Dollar Store, which was at that time the largest garment factory in San Francisco's Chinatown.¹⁴⁸ Two decades later when larger groups of Chinese immigrant women arrived in New York, ILGWU opened a local branch there.¹⁴⁹ However in the 1950s, many Chinese leftist movements were subjected to prosecution, acts of harassment and threats of deportation, and according to historian Mark Lai, the "effect . . . has generally been to cow the Chinese population into silence, and to intimidate the Chinese with sympathies for the left."¹⁵⁰

3.3. Educational Opportunities for Women of Color

Because education has proved to be crucial for social mobility, economic advancement and positive (self-)images in American society, it seems worthwhile to examine the relations of minority women to the educational system in the postwar era. To identify institutional authority and power, I will consider the significance of legal and cultural barriers, the role of the family and finally problems inherent in the educational institution itself.

3.3.1. Limiting Variables in Mexican American Women's Education

After World War II, many members of the Mexican American community became aware of the contradictions inherent in the American democratic society. Unwilling to accept discrimination and inequality any longer, they began to sue for their rights and succeeded in their fight for changes in the educational system. In 1946, a US District Court banned the segregation of Mexican American children in schools. A second decision in 1947, which stated that neither language nor race justified the segregation of Hispanic children, supported the former decision. In another case, a U.S. District Court decided "that the Mexican childrens' [sic] rights under the

¹⁴⁸ Dean Lan. "Chinatown Sweatshops". *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*. Ed. Emma Gee. Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1976. 352.

¹⁴⁹ Bao, "When Women Arrived", 29.

¹⁵⁰ Mark Lai. "A Historical Survey of the Chinese Left in America". *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*. Ed. Emma Gee. Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1976. 74.

Fourteenth Amendment had been violated.”¹⁵¹ But even though overt legal impediments to education had been abolished, discriminatory policies and exclusionary practices persisted. In fact, racial boundaries remained intact, so that Mexican American children mostly attended schools where the majority of the student body belonged to a minority group and only occasionally transferred to “mixed” schools.¹⁵² Because those students who attended integrated schools often experienced diverse forms of racism, the transfer to integrated schools represented critical moments in the lives of Mexican American students.¹⁵³

Other factors reveal that Mexican American children had to cope with particular hindrances which made enrollment and regular attendance difficult and which made equal education almost impossible. Although by 1950 Hispanics had become predominantly urban, a large number was still “on the move”, that is, moving according to the labor demand in agriculture. For Mexican American students, the loss of geographical stability was usually coupled with the disruption of schooling.¹⁵⁴ A Mexican American family made \$9,530 in 1959, while its white counterpart averaged \$14,675 per year¹⁵⁵ Thus many Hispanic families in the postwar decade could not afford to send their children to school continually and needed their children’s assistance either in housework or in paid work to supplement the low family income. In this context, the large proportion of unmarried women in the late 1940s suggests that they dutifully fulfilled family obligations and contributed to the family wage economy instead of marrying at an early age.¹⁵⁶

The family was another component which influenced the acquisition of education. In contrast to some of the factors discussed above, which account for the deficiencies in both boys’ and girls’ education, parental socialization was a significant sphere where educational expectations were formulated along gender lines.

¹⁵¹ Acuña, *Occupied America*, 330.

¹⁵² Acuña, *Occupied America*, 311, 334; Denise A. Segura. “Slipping through the Cracks: Dilemmas in Chicana Education”. *Building with Our Hands. New Directions in Chicana Studies*. Eds. Adela de la Torre and Beatriz M. Pesquera. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 200. See also Ruth D. Tuck. *Not with the Fist. Mexican Americans in a Southwest City*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946. 182-196.

¹⁵³ Louise Año Nuevo Kerr. “The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920-1970”. Diss. University of Illinois at Chicago, 1976. 39. Quoted in Acuña, *Occupied America*, 311; Tuck, *Not With the Fist*, 187. See also Dougal E. Foley with Clarica Mota, Donald E. Post and Ignacio Lozano. *From Peones to Politicos. Class and Ethnicity in a South Texas Town, 1900-1987. Mexican American Monographs 3*. 1st Rev. Ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988. 108ff.

¹⁵⁴ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 119.

¹⁵⁵ Vilma Ortiz. “Women of Color: A Demographic Overview”. *Women of Color in US Society*. Eds. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 32.

¹⁵⁶ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 111f.

Although second-generation Mexican American girls were offered and benefited from larger educational opportunities than their mothers of Mexican origin, anthropologist Ruth Tuck observed at the same time the especially low educational levels of Mexican American students.¹⁵⁷ This discrepancy can certainly be explained with the lower- or working-class affiliation of most Mexican American families, but I want to focus on the manner in which particular family structures supported or blocked educational attainment of their daughters. The Mexican American family of the 1940s and 1950s was an entity in transition which ensued from intercultural and intergenerational conflicts. Mediating between the expectations of their Mexican-born parents and American society, “the second generation, who experienced both cultures at one remove, received a complicated and variable legacy. . . .”¹⁵⁸

The situation for Mexican American girls was further confounding because the messages they received at home were far from being clear or consistent. While Chicana/o social scientists have proved the structure of the average Mexican American family to be profoundly more egalitarian than it appeared on the surface¹⁵⁹, patriarchal values, norms and practices remained relevant for Chicana girls in the postwar period. This meant that they were raised according to conventional gender scripts which assigned females the tasks of “child socialization, food preparation, religious observance, the retention of the Spanish language, and, most important, ... maintaining a primary orientation toward family.”¹⁶⁰ This complete absorption with the family seemed to be incompatible with economic and social independence or political activism, and hence made education for girls redundant. However, girls simultaneously learned that paid employment represented an indispensable part of most Mexican American women’s lives. Besides being established in the labor market, Mexican American women were also involved in civic activities in the late 1940s and the 1950s and thus qualified the ideal of the primacy of the family.¹⁶¹

In addition to these contradictory attitudes toward the roles of women in Mexican American families, the widespread opinion of education in the Mexican American community mirrored resignation in the face of structural racism and contracted labor markets. Statements like ‘Why finish high school if you can only pick fruit’ or “‘Look

¹⁵⁷ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 189.

¹⁵⁸ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 121.

¹⁵⁹ See Maxine Baca Zinn. “Family, Feminism and Race in America”. *Gender and Society* 4 (1990): 68-82; Richard G. Thurston. *Urbanization and Sociocultural Change in a Mexican American Enclave*. 1957. Saratoga: R and E Research Associates, 1974.

¹⁶⁰ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 125.

at the Salazar girl - two years at college and she couldn't get a job anywhere but in a bakery” attest to a lingering defeatist posture in an era of nascent resistance.¹⁶² In conclusion, it seems that in many Mexican American families, girls' education was not actively promoted by their parents. However, when parents showed concern for their daughters' education, either inadequate language skills or more or less undisguised forms of discouragement limited contact with the schools and involvement in their daughters' activities.¹⁶³ Being endowed with an ambiguous “legacy”, Mexican American girls entered a school system whose organization was not likely to solve the problems of these girls and to stabilize their precarious position.

For Hispanic children, one of the largest barriers in the educational system was the language. Although teachers were supposed to speak Spanish fluently, this was not the case in reality and communication between teacher and student was thus severely restricted. Speaking Spanish at home and on the playground, but receiving mandatory instructions in the English language, as was the case in New Mexico, put Mexican American students at a decided disadvantage.¹⁶⁴ Indifference and inattention of teachers aggravated this situation. As Anderson states, “those students who did not learn English readily were often labeled retarded, their chances for a quality education reduced very early.”¹⁶⁵ Instead of assisting poorly performing students, teachers entrenched behind implausible arguments: “that it is undemocratic to give special effort to minority members. . . .”¹⁶⁶ Not only language prescriptions but also testing practices turned potentially good students into low achievers, so that Tuck in 1946 called for discarding “the outmoded idea that intelligence testing measures hereditary endowments, divorced from all environmental factors.”¹⁶⁷

Teacher prejudices were especially devastating in the area of counseling which primarily aimed at advising students on their choice of vocation. A few teachers encouraged higher education for a variety of reasons: because girls would marry early, because of their disadvantages in the competitive examination for admission to college, and because of the parents' inability to fill out the necessary application

¹⁶¹ See Rose, “Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican American Barrios”, 177-200.

¹⁶² Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 189f.

¹⁶³ Joan M. Jensen. “Women Teachers, Class, and Ethnicity: New Mexico, 1900-1950”. *Southwest Economy and Society* 4 (Winter 1978-79): 3-13.

¹⁶⁴ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 119.

¹⁶⁵ Anderson, *Changing Woman*, 119.

¹⁶⁶ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 190.

¹⁶⁷ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 195.

forms.¹⁶⁸ Teachers saw vocational training and non-academic programs as the better alternative to college and thus supported the trend of channeling Mexican American girls into factories. Furthermore, many teachers counseled girls to pursue vocations which had ceased to exist while they ignored new, uncrowded areas of employment. Teachers recommended vocational classes, although Mexican American girls had often experienced to be without opportunities in the field of secretarial services. Consequently Tuck suspected “that vocational counseling . . . serve[d] the purpose of maintaining economic disadvantage.”¹⁶⁹

Finally, the monocultural curricula, whose omissions and distortions contributed to consolidating existing cultural hierarchies, were characterized by its unsuitability for the world of Mexican American students. The irrelevance of educational programs produced a considerable distance between school and reality and most often led to disinterest, low achievement and diminishing motivation.¹⁷⁰ In the 1940s and 1950s unequal schooling manifested itself in many ways. Patterns of segregation, inadequate counseling or the lack of practical curricular content represented some of the obstacles in the educational system which denied most Mexican American women the realization of education beyond first-level degrees.

3.3.2. African American Women and the Educational Obstacle Course

At the time when many white women decided against college because they considered it detrimental to marriage, the educational levels of African American women rose. Being excluded from most professional and white collar jobs, many black women developed a particular ambition for more satisfying and better paying work. Here, college education promised a way out of domestic service. In 1954, 57.8 percent of all graduates in black colleges were women, compared to the nationwide average of women of 35.8 percent.¹⁷¹ African American women received 68 percent of all bachelor's degrees from black colleges. The results of a study on African American women graduates partly confirmed this trend of educational success. 48 percent of the women interviewed had graduated with a master's degree and most of

¹⁶⁸ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 190.

¹⁶⁹ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 195.

¹⁷⁰ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 192f. See also Foley, *From Peones to Politicos*, 111.

them rated high with a grade average of B or better.¹⁷² Also at the higher levels of education, black women surpassed black men, but very few women entered traditionally male fields like law and medicine.¹⁷³ In general, the gains in education by African American women were equivocal because the developments within the next two years narrowed the gap between black men and women. Generally, the acquisition of high-level education continued to be more arduous for black women than for black men or white women. In 1958, only 3.2 percent of all black female students were enrolled in college or professional school in comparison with 4.8 percent of all black male students and 5.8 percent of all white female students.¹⁷⁴

Two dramatic breaks with “political quietism”¹⁷⁵, which pointed both at the chances of and barriers for African Americans during this period, surrounded black women’s educational possibilities in the postwar decade. As African American and other minorities had correctly surmised, court cases proved to be the most successful means in the battle for civil rights. The famous 1954 Brown decision found that racial segregation, which had a detrimental effect upon minority students, supported racial hierarchies and therefore banned *de jure* segregation in public schools. The effectiveness of the decision was impeded by two factors. Firstly, the court failed to prescribe a timetable for the exercise of its ruling. Secondly, equal educational opportunities in schools necessitated more than juridical laws because inequality resulted not only from segregated residential areas and but also from different resources like personnel and physical facilities.

Although the Brown case signaled educational progress for African Americans, inequality and injustice did not stop overnight. This decision did not guarantee integration and equal educational opportunity as it became clear with the historic battle in Little Rock, Arkansas. In this violence-torn city, both the governor and the white population had scorned the desegregation mandate for three years until in 1957, when six African American girls and three boys enrolled in Central High School. Governor Faubus’s misuse of the National Guard to bar the nine students from the school was countered by President Eisenhower sending troops to restore

¹⁷¹ Calculated from US Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1959*. 80th ed. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1959. 123 and 124.

¹⁷² Jeanne L. Noble. *The Negro Woman’s College Education*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 26.

¹⁷³ Hartmann, *The Home-Front and Beyond*, 108.

¹⁷⁴ US Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1959*. 80th ed. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1959. 105.

order and protect the blacks. To prevent black students from entering white schools, Faubus closed the public schools for the 1958-59 academic year.¹⁷⁶

Those who provided support for the students were constantly threatened by hatred and violence.¹⁷⁷ Many of those who were involved in Little Rock had to suffer tremendously. Five of the original nine students were compelled to move away, and Daisy Bates, who led the integration of Central High School, had to cope with terrorization, the bombing of her home and the closure of her newspaper *The Arkansas State Press*.¹⁷⁸

For African Americans, the issue of education was synonymous with empowerment and community development. Having its roots in the slave experience, the connection of education with group survival meant that individual education assumed political importance. Accordingly, many black women activists were teachers while teaching and education turned out to be an arena for political activism.¹⁷⁹ Leading school integration efforts were female activists like Mary McLeod Bethune or Daisy Bates who fought for the quality schooling of children and whose efforts were crowned with the Brown decision. Although male grass-roots activists were involved in school integration projects too, more organizing efforts were made by women.¹⁸⁰

There were several reasons for the overproportionate activism of African American women in this area. Family structures in the black community played one important role. Since one out of every four African American women headed a household in the 1950s¹⁸¹, the issue of reliable day care at school achieved primary importance, especially in the context of gainful employment. For those wage earners who were forced to support their children alone, the matter of school-based child care was certainly more pressing than for mothers who did not work or were supported by a partner.

Since the number of female household heads among the African American population was much larger than among other groups, especially the attitudes of

¹⁷⁵ Talcott Parsons. "Why 'Freedom Now', Not Yesterday?". *The Negro American*. Eds. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966. XXIII.

¹⁷⁶ Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*, 118.

¹⁷⁷ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 269f. See also Daisy Bates. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*. New York: David McKay, 1962.

¹⁷⁸ Kaledin, *Mothers and More*, 151, 154 and Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 296f.

¹⁷⁹ In this context, the numerous autobiographies and stories by African American teachers typify their deep commitment to social improvement and community development.

¹⁸⁰ Lynn, "Gender and Progressive Politics", 120.

¹⁸¹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 263; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 256.

black mothers towards education were of far-reaching consequence. Black women's determined engagement in the struggle for better opportunities points at a gendered role understanding according to which women battled more for their children's interests and rights. Even though most black families raised their children to accept wage work as a natural part of their lives, they pragmatically realized the significance better education would have particularly for their daughters.¹⁸² At the same time, the patterns in black women's work created among African American mothers and daughters a particular urgency for higher education. Thus providing a better chance for their daughters was a dominant theme among black mothers. Community development, encouragement in the family and the desire for dignified and financially rewarding work offered a powerful incentive for getting an education. Accordingly black women's representation among college graduates for the first time reached near parity in the 1940s.¹⁸³

In the mid-1960s, a prominent stance among left sociologists was to emphasize the necessity and exigency of black assimilation, in other words to advise ways to adapt African Americans to white middle-class patterns. In order to determine the function of the educational institution for the integration of black Americans, John H. Fischer surveyed the steps that had been taken to end inequality in schooling. He identified two critical fields which hindered school integration, namely the free choice policy and urban ghettoization, and devised a program to improve the educational attainment of African American students.¹⁸⁴ Criticizing the cultural and racial biases of testing mechanisms, but accepting their utility, Fischer urged schools to devote special attention to black students to raise low standards of achievement. He appealed for the revision of curricula, the reorganization of teaching schedules, the intensification of counseling and the reform of vocational programs. Despite the progress that had been made, these proposals provided clues to the maze of obstacles still inherent in the educational system which maintained inequalities especially in secondary education. Black schools commonly received lower funding,

¹⁸² Hartmann, *The Home-Front and Beyond*, 107f.

¹⁸³ Noble, *The Negro Woman's College Education*, 28-30. Figures on female enrollment always refer to black institutions, because statistics on black students in integrated schools are not available. See also Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 248f.

¹⁸⁴ John H. Fischer. "Race and Reconciliation: The Role of the School". *The Negro American*. Eds. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966. 491-511.

their equipment was poorer, the teachers were paid less and their curricula were inferior.¹⁸⁵

3.3.3. Small Gains in the Long Struggle: Asian American Women and Their Educational Choices

Chinese and Japanese women's performance in school was not exactly the result of maximum opportunities in the system of education. Like Mexican and African American students, they were excluded from most public schools and were sometimes formally ordered to attend segregated, all-Asian schools which persisted until 1954.¹⁸⁶ Even though the Brown decision functioned as a "consciousness-raiser" among educational decision-makers, it failed to be a turning point for Asian American students. In comparison with suburban schools, inner-city schools remained practically unchanged, that is separate and handicapped by poorer facilities, less qualified teachers and inferior programs of instruction.

But with respect to educational attainment, the Chinese and Japanese were at the opposite end of the spectrum from African Americans and Mexican Americans. In 1950, the proportion of the Japanese and Chinese population with a college degree was 1.4 times larger than the white proportion, while African Americans had a little more than one third of the white proportion.¹⁸⁷ The 1960 census revealed that within one decade, the number of Chinese and Chinese American female graduates from high school leapt from 23.1 to 48.3 percent, whereas college graduates increased from 7.8 to 12.5 percent of the Chinese population.

For Japanese and Japanese American women, the path to education had already begun during the internment years. Prior to the war, only few had attended college. In the camp environment, many women developed a new sense of self-confidence and independence, and when the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council (NJASRC) began to support education among Japanese Americans by offering scholarships, advice and assistance, they were quick to use this chance.

¹⁸⁵ Gunnar Myrdal. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper Bros., 1944. 622-39.

¹⁸⁶ Mike Murase. "Ethnic Studies and Higher Education for Asian Americans". *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*. Ed. Emma Gee. Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1976. 214.

¹⁸⁷ Calculated from US Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1959*. 80th ed. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1959. 108 and 129.

The share of women in the student relocation program ranged between 30 and 40 percent.¹⁸⁸ Oscillating between reservation and ambition, most parents finally accepted their daughters' wishes to find their place outside patriarchal and paternal control.

The majority of Asian American daughters grew up in families which attempted to maintain male-dominated family values while integrating into an "American way of life". Although both groups sharply differentiated between male and female roles and Asian women complained of the double standards in their families, many immigrant parents encouraged their daughters to complete high school and college. Traditionally, Asians and Asian Americans had deep respect for education and knowledge. They realized that scholastic achievement was crucial in a society in which they operated at a disadvantage. Both sons and daughters were expected to devote their time and energy to their studies and to perform well at school.¹⁸⁹ While grappling with these contradictions at home, Chinese and Chinese American girls' and women's situation was made more difficult by discrimination at school.

Like many Mexican Americans, limited or non-English speaking Chinese students encountered severe problems in an educational system which refused special help in English. Besides instilling shame and frustration, the inability to understand the regular work sometimes resulted in poor performance, higher drop-out rates and even juvenile delinquency. The cultural and racial background of Asian American students was equally irrelevant for testing methods which measured qualities like intelligence and behavior.¹⁹⁰ Since 1948, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administered tests, was able to expand its near-monopoly status. The gap between this private, untaxed and unregulated institution and the realities of Asian American and other minority students necessarily discriminated against those who could not fulfill white, male and upper-class norms.¹⁹¹ Because intelligence and achievement tests tended to measure those kinds of knowledge which white, male and middle-class students were more likely to acquire, biased testing methods and ethnocentric courses put Chinese students at a disadvantage. Stereotypical images of Chinese not only pervaded widely used textbooks but also the attitudes of the staff

¹⁸⁸ Matsuoko, "Japanese American Women During World War II", 454f and 457f.

¹⁸⁹ See Matsuoko, "Japanese American Women During World War II", 446; Bao, "When Women Arrived", 29 and May Ying Chen. "Teaching a Course on Asian American Women". *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*. Ed. Emma Gee. Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1976. 237f.

¹⁹⁰ Murase, "Ethnic Studies and Higher Education", 216.

towards the students. These stereotypes affected the prevalent teaching methods as well as counseling practices. Instead of considering the student's abilities and wishes, counselors and advisors directed students to courses according to the way they conceived Chinese Americans. Those students who had mastered high school and aspired to go to college were sometimes placed in the vocational training program rather than in the college preparatory curriculum.¹⁹² Like anthropologist Tuck in her study on Mexican Americans, sociologist Mike Murase criticizes that "tracking" was a practice which systematized preexisting inequalities and helped to stratify the workforce.

Different studies have revealed that for Asian American students their home environment and individual attitudes were as important as schools in influencing achievement.¹⁹³ In spite of lacking support in the educational system, there were other forces at work that in part counterbalanced institutional deficiencies and that determined the growing educational level of Asian American women. These included improving socioeconomic status, overt family messages to study, and strong personal motivation.

¹⁹¹ Murase, "Ethnic Studies and Higher Education", 216f.

¹⁹² Murase, "Ethnic Studies and Higher Education", 216 and 220.

¹⁹³ See for example James Coleman et al. *Equality of Educational Equality*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966 and Frederick Mosteller and David P. Moynihan (eds.). *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

4. Constructions of Womanhood

An inquiry into the ways in which Americans imagined and shaped their relationship to “transpersonal” realities, that is to social structures and empirical events, in the years between 1945 and 1960 is confronted with almost frantic debates in various academic disciplines on “woman” and her proper place in society in order to account for shifts in society and culture. Revising nineteenth century models, the discussion resumed - in some ways with an unprecedented intensity - the venerable convention of thinking about “the nature of the feminine”. This tradition was always revived in times when the American credo of equal rights and democracy was strongly contradicted by the reality of social hierarchies and inequalities¹⁹⁴. Functioning as a direct, principal medium of communication and signification, much of this “expert knowledge” produced by the disciplinary community of scientists provided an essential site for the construction of ideological processes. Because of their essentially systematic and rational format, the scientific conceptions can be analyzed in this chapter as a paradigm case of ideological negotiation. The interpretations of social developments by those who were both producers and reproducers of meaning by profession or vocation represent a form of communicative engagement which contributed significantly to prevailing cultural categories in the fifteen-year-period after World War II. As scholars had both the authority and the power to speak, their discourse had a tremendous impact on controlling ideas about the organization of society. It shows that a rather large number of researchers and scholars was apparently obsessed by the question of what it meant to be a woman and what her status, her abilities and her role were or were meant to be. In the search for the cause of a range of social and political problems like communism, homosexuality, juvenile delinquency and poverty, these purveyors of hegemonic discourses turned their investigations to the gender-specific nature of social patterns. In times when the “old certainties of the past are gone,”¹⁹⁵ as anthropologist Margaret Mead described the era, women’s changing position and function in society seemed to offer a plausible model of explanation for postwar transformations. Conservative images of womanhood which resulted from the stance of women being the origins of social

¹⁹⁴ See Mary P. Ryan. *Womanhood in America. From Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: New Viewpoints, 1975. 14.

¹⁹⁵ Margaret Mead. *Male and Female. A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*. New York: William Morrow, 1949. 4.

exigencies were developed next to variant perspectives which mostly took their starting point in a materially changed situation and the ensuing chances for women. The scientific investigations into the “woman problem” were cast and anchored within different and sometimes conflicting discourses, ranging from anthropology to psychology, sociology and history. The scientific perspectives are therefore the central focus of this chapter.¹⁹⁶ The following discussion provides an in-depth survey of those postwar gender conceptions which were expressed by the loud and powerful voices of academia. By exploring the range of themes and positions in the dominant terrain of postwar gender ideology, this chapter seeks to uncover the internal consistency and unity in this discursive field as well as to determine the plausibility and persuasive power of the academic constructions.

4.1. Plumbing the Depths of Sexual Difference

Among the first to turn to women in order to reassess their societal position after the war was Ashley Montagu.¹⁹⁷ He placed his book in the tradition of writings which meant to disprove the ubiquitous idea of female inferiority, but unlike most of his predecessors, he approached his subject from the perspective of a biological anthropologist. Arguing for a more complementary relationship between the sexes and more appreciation for each other, Montagu found it necessary first to demolish the terms of male social and cultural dominance which the author explained and justified with men’s physical supremacy.

¹⁹⁶ To capture the variety in the debate, I am looking in what follows at a random sample of authors and publications which were published, read and reviewed after the war. Even though in my sample, female authors outnumber male, this imbalance is purely accidental and of no consequence: I did not discover significant differences between studies by women and studies by men. In fact, female scholars largely reinforced the speculative character of studies about women without reflecting their own position in the discourse. Their producing comparable texts about women’s role and identity shows at best their readiness to align themselves with the dominant, male-controlled class which probably had a vested interest in securing the status quo.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which was most influential in Europe and appeared in the United States in 1953, is not considered here, because it has already been dealt with in countless critical analyses. Moreover, although the fear of the book’s potentiality was unmistakable in the fact that American readers were cautioned against its “political learnings”, de Beauvoir’s book only rarely received attention by well-known social analysts in the 1950s. Indeed it was in prime one decade later when it became one of the key texts of the women’s movement during the 1960s and was understood as the antithesis to Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. See for example Sandra Dijkstra. “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission”. *Feminist Studies* 6.2 (Summer 1980): 290.

¹⁹⁷ Ashley Montagu. *The Natural Superiority of Women*. New and rev. ed. New York: Collier Books, 1992. Although Montagu’s book has never been out of print since 1953, it has been subject to extensive revisions until today.

Starting with the exploration of anatomic, genetic and psychological differences, Montagu focused on biological differences between the sexes in order to disclose the ways in which they had served to establish social inequity. His arguments therefore operated on two levels. Firstly, he studied data which determined and justified women's subordinate position and dismantled the general tendency in society to ignore or to invert scientific physical facts. Surveying the latest data, he concluded that women were neither physically nor psychologically inferior, but rather superior to men in terms of constitution, the form of the female skull, genetic capacity, emotional stability and intelligence. On the basis of his mélange of statistical details, Montagu as a second step reinterpreted women's personality traits and attitudes. Although his theory rested on women's anatomy, the message of *The Natural Superiority of Women* resided in Montagu's proclamation of a distinctly female character.

In contrast to his strategy in his discussion of women's physical characteristics, Montagu relied on prevalent social stereotypes of women and corroborated them by revealing their scientific foundation. But instead of denigrating, Montagu glorified "the female personality". For instance, he supported the fact that women were emotionally unstable, but claimed that this trait was "simply evidence of the female's superior resiliency, her possession of a resource that permits her to absorb the shocks of life, to tolerate the stresses and strains to which she is subjected much more efficiently than the male."¹⁹⁸ In a similar, re-interpretative manner, Montagu conceded that women were liable to more gossip, but beside simply being more humanely communicative than men, women most successfully released themselves from isolation and tension by talking more than men.¹⁹⁹ But emotional flexibility and communication abilities were only a small part of Montagu's picture of women: being loving, quickly responsive, careful, considerate, quiet, religious, tactful, discreet and intuitive, women excelled over men in almost any field. That women in the past had not performed as brilliantly as men was due to four reasons: they rarely received systematic education, they were hindered from entering fields like science and the arts, those who did enter were measured by male standards and usually ignored, and - last but not least - "women have simply not been as interested for themselves in the kind of achievement upon which men place so high a premium. . . . all I am

¹⁹⁸ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 121f.

¹⁹⁹ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 129.

saying is that women, because they are women are more interested in relationships in which they can creatively love and be loved.”²⁰⁰

While Montagu was firm in his conviction of women’s “higher survival value,”²⁰¹ he occasionally admitted his own uncertainty whether the differences he had discovered were inborn qualities or whether they resulted from socialization. However, this insecurity did not pertain to the core of his argument. That love was “woman’s domain”, instead of work, profession, achievement and competition, was regarded by Montagu as the inevitable consequence of her physiological abilities to give birth and to lactate. From this function, Montagu deduced woman’s innate character and unique mission. Her duties not only lay in the bearing and rearing of children, but especially in teaching males how to be gentle and tender. Women’s “unselfish, forbearing, self-sacrificing and maternal” love was the only means to bring up “*men* who will know how to participate in the process of creating a world fit for human beings to live in.”²⁰²

Despite Montagu’s definite role expectations defining men in terms of activity and society and women in terms of passivity and the home, he discerned the limits of his assumption of women’s family-centeredness in the face of a rising number of women in the workforce. Here, Montagu exclusively concentrated on married mothers who worked for personal fulfillment. His verdict was that wage work was only an option for mothers after children had passed the age of six, because until then children needed the full devotion of their mothers. Although Montagu conceded mothers the right to work, he denied that women could successfully combine their traditional duties with full-time employment. His proposal of a reduced working day for parents of both sexes was meant to diminish the strain for both partners and to make family life more satisfactory for children and parents.²⁰³ Because Montagu’s proposal was not directed at low income families, he obviously saw no need to work out a financial scheme to offset the reduced working hours.

It is not difficult to imagine why Montagu felt driven in the early 1950s to publish his ideas, which, as he later acknowledged, were clearly inspired by pioneer writer Havelock Ellis.²⁰⁴ As a teacher of anatomy and physical anthropology, Montagu became convinced of women’s biological priority, that is their “natural superiority”.

²⁰⁰ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 188.

²⁰¹ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 239.

²⁰² Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 190 and 191, my emphasis.

²⁰³ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 228-232.

Throughout his book, his references to male belligerency, war, destruction and peace, continually bespoke apocalyptic anxieties characteristic of Cold War discourse. Certainly not by accident, Montagu mentioned Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Hitler (in this order) as examples of inhumane men who had never been taught to love others. In this context, the consequences of women's social elevation, which, according to Montagu, was founded on the appreciation of women's ability to "create" and "foster" life, were twofold. Firstly, an equilibrium between the two sexes strengthened the American democratic system and gave the US an advantage over the Soviet Union. Secondly, the acceptance of maternal love as a guiding principle of states ultimately eliminated not only national, but also international conflicts and competition for power. Thus, *The Natural Superiority of Women* remained strictly within the Cold War rhetoric in which selfless and caring motherhood interlocked with national security, democracy and freedom. All those who did not share this understanding of maternity and society, but questioned the invariable nature of his model were ridiculed as masculine women or effeminate men who tried to make up for their own inferiority complexes.

Although it was only added in the second edition of *The Natural Superiority of Women*, Montagu's chapter on female sexuality mirrored the beginning of the collapse of academic reserve in regard to sex.²⁰⁵ That women were more important in the reproductive process than men was nothing new, but it proved again, according to Montagu, women's biological value. His central thesis of women's morally and socially "superior" sexuality mainly relied on Alfred Kinsey's bestseller *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which was published simultaneously with Montagu's book in 1953.²⁰⁶ What distinguished and ennobled women then was that they were not promiscuous and not preoccupied with sex, that marriage meant more for them than regular sex, and that they were sexually reticent but more durable. He concluded that women's sexual superiority was

sexual behavior of a kind which confers survival benefits upon all who participate in it, as well as creative benefits upon all who come within the

²⁰⁴ Ellis's *Man and Woman. A Study in the Secondary and Tertiary Characters* was published in 1894.

²⁰⁵ See for example Therese Benedek. *Psychosexual Functions in Women*. New York: Ronald Press, 1952; Frank Samuel Caprio. *The Sexually Adequate Female*. New York: Citadel Press, 1953; Eustace Chesser. *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationship of the English Woman*. London: Hutchinson, 1956; George Washington Corner. *Attaining Womanhood. A Doctor Talks to Girls About Sex*. New York: Harper, 1952; Maxine Davis. *The Sexual Responsibility of Women*. New York: Dial Press, 1956; Johnson Fairchild. *Women, Society and Sex*. New York: Sheridan House, 1952.

²⁰⁶ Alfred Kinsey et al. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia, London: W. B. Saunders, 1953.

orbit of its influence. The female enjoys this sexual superiority by fiat, as it were, of nature, but there is absolutely no reason why the male cannot learn to adjust himself harmoniously . . . and acquire by second nature those controls with which the female has for the most part been endowed by nature.²⁰⁷

Although Montagu did not dispute that women had natural sex drives, his acknowledgment of women's sexuality was narrowly circumscribed by modesty and chastity. Thus, Montagu completely ignored those data which incited a heated discussion about the Kinsey report, which pointed at a conspicuous discrepancy between conservative social values and more permissive sexual practices. Even though he intended his book to end the inequality between the sexes, Montagu's moral and biased perspective was exactly what Kinsey had been afraid of: "it would be unfortunate if any of the comparisons . . . should be taken to indicate that there are sexual qualities which are only found in one or the other sex. The record will have misled the reader if he fails to note this emphasis on the range of variation. . . ."²⁰⁸ Montagu's description of women embodying specific distinctive traits contained a contradictory message. On the one hand, it reproduced the ideology of separate roles and spheres, but on the other hand, it constantly publicized and politicized woman- and motherhood and thus undermined the idea of women's social, political and economic segregation.

In 1956, Eric Dingwall openly lamented two predominant tendencies among American scholars. In his opinion, anthropologists, sociologists and historians preferred to examine remote, exotic cultures instead of their own, and their analyses of diverse societies usually disregarded the role and function of women.²⁰⁹ This accusation could certainly be brought neither against Montagu nor against the anthropologist Margaret Mead. In her book *Male and Female. A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, Mead extensively dealt with the question of how both men's and women's biological inheritance shaped the different cultural systems of the Pacific Islands and of the United States.²¹⁰ In her third chapter which explored contemporary America, Mead outlined the relationship and the differences between the sexes as both evolved in the various stages of human life.

²⁰⁷ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 108.

²⁰⁸ Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, 538.

²⁰⁹ Eric Dingwall. *The American Woman: A Historical Study*. London: Gerald Duckworth, 1956. 10.

²¹⁰ Margaret Mead. *Male and Female. A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1949.

Similar to the majority of social scientists, Mead saw the most prominent feature of American postwar society in its transitional status. This development had profound effects on the roles of men and women, but the widening chances for both sexes, and especially those for women, were restricted by too strict definitions of masculinity and femininity. Mead painted a picture of a society which furnished its members with vast freedoms, but whose gender ideology structurally barred them from making full use of all it had to offer. The discontent and the problems which were generated by this discrepancy were not, according to Mead, confined to women but affected society as a whole. Since social form and organization, which were most significant in smoothing the way into the future, depended on the equal contribution of men and women to society, Mead advocated a new understanding of gender roles to match modern conditions. She called for greater social, cultural and political participation by women because it had become obvious what happened when women were relegated to the margins of society. She concluded that:

we shall be ready to synthesize both kinds of gifts in the sciences, which are now sadly lop-sided with their far greater knowledge of how to destroy than of how to construct, far better equipped to analyze the world of matter into which man can project his intelligence than the world of human relations, which requires the socialized use of intuition.²¹¹

Mead was convinced that men and women had to fulfill specific roles in society and that sex-specific gifts were the natural outcome of these functions. The gender qualities Mead designated were rather traditional: women were associated with teaching, understanding, and intuition, and men with leadership, discovery, and physical sciences. From her exploration of different cultures, Mead had learned that feminine or masculine qualities were largely the result of social definitions, but for her, the roots of sexual diversity did not matter as long as both sexes succeeded in complementing each other. While Mead cautioned against downplaying differences, she also criticized the popular trend to “overstress the rôle of sex difference and extend it inappropriately to other aspects of life, to stereotypes of such complex activities as those involved in the formal use of the intellect, in the arts, in government, and in religion.”²¹² Most vehemently, Mead rejected essentialist notions of gender difference, because they denied the array of differences among the members of one sex as well as the enormous overlap of masculine and feminine

²¹¹ Mead, *Male and Female*, 383.

²¹² Mead, *Male and Female*, 373.

characteristics. Throughout her review, Mead tried to avoid giving a clear definition of masculine and of feminine qualities because she noticed both the artificiality and the danger inherent in such a definition. She was most aware of the complexity of gender roles, whose balance had been kept over centuries by “moves and counter-moves.”²¹³ Yet she believed that women at present were denied the freedom to use their bodies and minds, and were therefore put at a greater disadvantage than men. This development imperiled the social equilibrium. Consequently, she concluded that “we can build a whole society only by using both the gifts special to each sex and those shared by both sexes - by using the gifts of the whole of humanity.”²¹⁴

In his assessment of twentieth-century American society, Eric Dingwall consulted the American past more systematically than Mead had done. Although assuming an anthropological point of view as well, Dingwall did not arrive at the same conclusion as Mead. While Mead carefully stressed male and female interdependency, underlining that women did not live in a vacuum and that women’s problems were likewise men’s problems, Dingwall put the social crisis down to matriarchal structures and positioned women at the core of social tensions and riddles. He discovered a new and devastating concern with femaleness in American culture which was the contradictory consequence both of women’s fight for equality and power and the Puritan ideals of purity, virginity and chastity.²¹⁵ These two directions resulted in the belief of women’s cultural and sexual superiority, Dingwall argued, and finally woman’s image had become removed from reality and women’s real needs and wishes. This prompted American women to become more and more discontent. Puritan and feminist ideologies did not permit women to live according to their nature. Although Dingwall described women partly as victims of society, he paradoxically declared society to be a victim of women as well. Men’s subordination to women and their want of stamina contributed to a vicious circle because they simply surrendered to women’s claim to power. But male obedience was the consequence of the mother-son relationship. The cult of motherhood, Dingwall claimed in unison with Edward Strecker²¹⁶, added to the precarious situation of men and women. Mothers who were deeply dissatisfied, yet commanded complete power

²¹³ Mead, *Male and Female*, 384.

²¹⁴ Mead, *Male and Female*, 384.

²¹⁵ Dingwall, *The American Woman*, 348.

²¹⁶ Strecker’s book *Their Mothers’ Sons. A Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*. Philadelphia, New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1946 will be discussed in the next chapter.

over their children, were responsible for projecting their own neuroses and complexes onto their sons.

These three anthropological analyses shared, and more or less articulated, the idea of a necessary differentiation of gender roles which was based on different female and male qualities. In different ways, they agreed that the relationship between men and women was unsettled because male and female roles increasingly converged. But while Montagu approved of women's ingress into the public life which would infuse it with love and peace, Dingwall condemned any activity of women in what he regarded to be the male sphere. In contrast to these positions, Mead's deduction was almost audacious and far ahead of her time. Without claiming that women's qualities were inborn, she believed that culture could not exist without gender role differentiation. But at the same time she also called for more tolerance of types of behavior which did not correspond with culturally specific gender norms. But whatever origins the investigators ascribed to the existence of gender characteristics and however significant the cultural context was deemed to be for the relationship between the sexes, the conception of the differences between the sexes and the ensuing different gender roles implied a polarization of female and male characteristics.

4.2. Designating the Particularities of Women's Nature

In 1945, psychologist Helene Deutsch published her work *The Psychology of Women*, which was to become the bible of a generation of female psychologists.²¹⁷ Like Montagu, Deutsch also assumed that women were biologically determined. Starting from a psychoanalytical point of view she analyzed the roots of the "feminine character", a term that was meant to designate particular female needs, sentiments and consciousness. In her interpretation of Freud's theory of the female penis envy, she delineated a more general "genital trauma" which was the product of woman's organic inadequacy with respect to sexual satisfaction. As a psychoanalyst, Deutsch's interest lay in finding the consequences of their "deficient anatomy" for the psychology of women. She affirmed that the core of femininity basically consisted of

²¹⁷ Helene Deutsch. *The Psychology of Women. A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. 2 Vols. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1945.

passivity, masochism and narcissism which resulted primarily from the absence of a penetrating, active organ. Passivity, which was euphemistically described as inner-directed activity, was inevitably linked to the feminine personality, thus offering a sharp counterpoint to male aggression and activity. The harmonious interplay of these feminine traits contributed to a further, vital feature of the mature woman: her eroticism. The prototype of femininity

leaves the initiative to the man and out of her own need renounces originality, experiencing her own self through identification. . . . These women are not only the ideal life companions for men, if they possess the feminine quality of intuition to a great degree, they are ideal collaborators who often inspire their men and are themselves happiest in their role. . . . If gifted in any direction, they preserve the capacity of being original and productive, but without entering into competitive struggles. They are willing to renounce their own achievements without the feeling that they are sacrificing anything.²¹⁸

Depending on the intensity of each formative tendency, Deutsch identified different types of women which were circumscribed by the healthy, “erotic-feminine” woman at one pole and the abnormal, “intellectual-masculine” woman at the opposite pole. Her glorification of the feminine woman, who enriched her environment with her warmth, harmony and peacefulness and who was set off from the aggressive, unproductive and non-maternal intellectual woman, made clear what the female biology predestined women to in order to find complete fulfillment: reproduction. The political context of Deutsch’s theory was visible in the “trendy” emphasis of woman’s maternal function and her non-destructive nature. In her analysis of women’s wartime activities, Deutsch accordingly emphasized women’s longing for home life and maternity which perfectly met their biology and psychology.

This perception of women’s physical and mental features meshed with another elaboration of *the* feminine human nature. In Eva Firkel’s *Woman in the Modern World*²¹⁹, those issues which surrounded the role of women in society provided the substance of the book. Although Firkel did not discuss women’s sexuality to the same degree as Deutsch, her strategy and primary goal were comparable. Starting from the examination of women’s organic and mental constitution, she developed an understanding of women’s social roles, which she derived without exception from their universal maternal instinct.

²¹⁸ Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 191f.

²¹⁹ Eva Firkel. *Woman in the Modern World*. London: Burns and Oates, 1956. IX.

At first, Firkel sketched her bipolar conception of human qualities by associating women with the motherly virtues (as completeness, passivity, person-centeredness), love, sympathy and compassion, while men were joined to intellectual independence, productivity and rationality.²²⁰ Women's "healthy" nature was contrasted with some forms of "abnormal" behavior, for instance fear or hysteria, which endangered women's fulfillment of their role, but which could be successfully remedied, by psychotherapy if necessary. Following the different phases of female development, Firkel gave her study a noticeable handbook character. It contained advice on the proper upbringing of girls, on problems in marriage and on the life style of unmarried women.

The quintessence of Firkel's book was basically that after men had proved capable of destroying the world, women's maternal and domestic feats were a necessary counterbalance to male coldness. Firkel was convinced that women were able to exercise influence over men and hence over economic and political interests. In order to succeed in "bring[ing] man home", she warned women not to "worm their way into spheres that do not belong to them."²²¹ The assignment of the home as women's sphere clearly revealed the conformity of Firkel's ideas to archaic conventions. Nevertheless there was a side to her debate over the female character which indicated a slight change in the division of roles. Firkel admitted that the different spheres were not entirely separate and opposing, because women increasingly entered the male sphere by working outside the home. She stressed that through working mothers "feminine spirituality should be released into the world." She also believed that as long as wage labor did not interfere with women's motherly functions, gainful employment provided a source of material and psychological contentment for women and their families.²²²

Firkel's counsel called attention to a family scenario which had already been probed a few years before. In his book *Their Mothers' Sons*, Edward Strecker described the consequences resulting from mothers who wanted challenges other than parenting, but had no task other than full-time mothering. Strecker, who had been a psychiatric consultant to the Surgeons General of the Army and Navy and adviser to the Secretary of War, analyzed in his book the reasons behind the high rate of men rejected by or discharged from military service on grounds of

²²⁰ Firkel, *Woman in the Modern World*, 22-28.

²²¹ Firkel, *Woman in the Modern World*, 211.

²²² Firkel, *Woman in the Modern World*, 127ff.

neuropsychiatric disorders. He very soon gathered that maternal overinvolvement prevented male maturity and would eventually culminate in national chaos. His book was an indictment of women's indirect power over social and political developments.

Strecker's use of the category mother was deceptive. His verdict of who was accountable for a generation of psychoneurotics included non-mothers as well as mothers, and on occasion even fathers.²²³ Motherhood was obviously not restricted to its actual meaning; any woman fulfilled motherly functions. The inference from this train of thought was that the female role was generally tied to motherhood. Strecker divided women into two types, namely those who were worthy of the label mother, and those whose pathological "immaturity" let them degenerate into "moms". Both types invariably exhibited specific personality traits which entailed opposing consequences for society. According to the author's scale, biological moms represented the lowest level of society.

Immature women differed from mature women in their personal history and in their attitudes toward their family. The four determinants of the absence of a woman's maturity were defined by Strecker: a dominant and overprotective mother, an uninterested husband, sexual frustration and the social fetishism of mothers.²²⁴ Although Strecker openly claimed that societal worship of maternal selflessness also deserved devastating criticism, his continuous references to women's sexual discontent throughout the book indicated that he assigned this factor paramount significance for the explanation of the causes of "momism".²²⁵ Reflecting the popularity of Freudian theory and idioms, Strecker worked out his variation of the Oedipus complex. Wanting sexual satisfaction in marriage, Strecker argued, frustrated women gave their full attention to their sons and absorbed all filial sexual energies. In redirecting the sons' sexual drives towards the impossible, women were responsible for burning social problems which emerged when their sons were searching for substitute keys to sexual pleasure.²²⁶

While Firkel worried about mothers who were not completely dedicated to their children, Strecker saw tremendous danger in those mothers whose lives excessively

²²³ Strecker's terminology is obsolete today. In psychology, the term "mental disorder" is more common than "psychoneuroses".

²²⁴ Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 70-74 and 160-168. The term matriarchy is used by Strecker to denounce the mother-centered values of American society.

²²⁵ See especially Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 42ff and 128-132.

²²⁶ Strecker claimed that outlets for "immature" sexuality were psychoneuroses, schizophrenia, religiousness, political engagement, military service, alcoholism and homosexuality.

centered upon their children.²²⁷ In spite of his contrary interpretation of the role and function of American mothers, Strecker wanted to cure the same disease as Firkel:

Upon the successful solution of the dilemma depends not only the welfare of a mother's children, but, in a large part, the basic survival of the nation of which her children are to be the future citizens and statesmen. . . . No nation would have to pay as great a penalty as the United States for not solving [the mother-child dilemma].²²⁸

In other words, adequate mothering and democratic family life were intertwined with national interests. With the suggestion that the future development of the United States depended to a large degree on how successfully women fulfilled their mother functions, the ideal of woman- and motherhood was tightly woven into social and political structures. For Strecker, the soundness of the American democratic system was directly dependent on the "maturity" of mothers because "particularly mature mothers are competent to teach their children these lessons of democracy. . . . If the intermediate territory of 'give-and-take' is populated with the sons and daughters of moms and their surrogates, then democracy cannot stand."²²⁹ Overprotective mothers threatened democracy in the field of international, domestic and foreign policy. Firstly, because, according to Strecker, "a *mature* world . . . could have avoided war."²³⁰ Secondly, totalitarianism, exemplified by Nazi Germany and its ally Japan, was the immediate result of possessive mothers, who were emotionally too involved with their sons and prevented their manhood and independence. And thirdly, only emotionally and sexually independent sons were able to defend democracy against these totalitarian systems. In substituting passivity for male aggressiveness, mothers triumphantly undermined Cold War foreign policy. Beside the ridiculous accusation that the emasculating nature of women was to blame, Strecker's verdict was not convincing because of its internal inconsistency: on the one hand, he made an "immature" world responsible for having "embroiled itself in two costly wars in two and a half decades." On the other hand, he reproached the same "immature" men in America with attempting to evade military service and the

²²⁷ Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, 229 and Firkel, *Woman in the Modern World*, 126. Even though Strecker occasionally mentioned the effect of maternal overindulgence on daughters, his concentration on sons on the whole is conspicuous. In focusing on male sexual immaturity and its connections to the mothers' roles, Strecker apparently followed Freud's sexist footsteps. Freud's explication of human (sexual) development was derived from the mother-son relationship. See also Ilene Philipson. "Heterosexual Antagonisms and the Politics of Mothering". *Socialist Review* 12 (1982): 55-77.

²²⁸ Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 23f.

²²⁹ Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 148.

²³⁰ Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 212, my emphasis.

battlefield²³¹. The conclusion, however, remained unaffected by this contradiction: women imperiled national and personal success.

The same social malady was diagnosed by Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham in their controversial and oft-discussed book *Modern Woman. The Lost Sex*.²³² Observing intensifying social problems which ranged from radicalism and nonconformism to low birth rates, divorce, homicide and crime, the authors set out to uncover the reasons for these increasing phenomena. At the bottom of these phenomena, Lundberg and Farnham found existential unhappiness which then led to neurotic behavior and social deterioration. Because the authors were convinced that the “bases for most of this unhappiness . . . are laid in the childhood home,” they inquired into the role of mothers in the development of unhappiness and psychic disorders.²³³ They came to the conclusion that it was the mother who was responsible for psychological debilitation, because women themselves were “psychologically disordered and . . . their disorder is having terrible social and personal effects. . . .”²³⁴ While Strecker rooted women’s social inadequacy in their psychology, Farnham and Lundberg traced it to women’s loss of roles, which was brought about not only by industrialization, but also by feminism. Lundberg and Farnham classified women into a neurotic and a truly feminine group. The true woman, who was characterized by inwardness, passivity and dependence, gloried in her sexual distinctiveness, ready to reach the “final goal . . . - impregnation.”²³⁵ Like the other psychologists discussed above, they saw women’s role in motherhood, and their descriptions of the real mother closely resembled Strecker’s ideal.

Lundberg’s and Farnham’s incentive for this study was different from that of Deutsch, Firkel or Strecker, but no less political. In their attack against feminism, both writers rejected feminist strivings for equality and autonomy because they provided women with goals which they believed to be both impossible and undesirable to achieve. Outside work, they argued, climaxed in women’s defeminization. This concern clearly mirrored the rapid and dramatic transitions taking place during and after the war. For Lundberg and Farnham, social processes and tensions were grounded in women’s changing role and place. Thus, expanding

²³¹ Strecker, *Their Mothers’ Sons*, 212.

²³² Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham. *Modern Woman. The Lost Sex*. New York, London, Harper, 1947.

²³³ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 71.

²³⁴ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, V.

²³⁵ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 237.

educational and professional possibilities menaced not only the traditional division of work but also the social order in general. To find their own fulfillment and to rescue the human race, women had to disavow feminism and reinvigorate instead their suspended, feminine virtues.²³⁶

It is obvious that those thinkers who approached “woman” from a psychological or Freudian point of view were starkly conservative, even reactionary, in their presentations. They revived traditional stereotypes of women: the real woman was passive, loving and dependent. Her character was biologically defined, either by her want of a penis or by her child-bearing capacity. All authors whole-heartedly endorsed motherhood and characterized it as an obligatory, but powerful phenomenon, because it could both secure and endanger the welfare of the state. Comparable with the nineteenth-century woman’s rights debate or the women’s pacifist movement of the 1920s, mother- and womanhood was thus politicized, because their specific, feminine qualities were needed to secure civilization and peace.

What is striking in these notions about the proper place of women then is that they sometimes bore traces of almost liberal ideas. In the attempt to qualify the ideal of women’s family-centeredness, it was acknowledged that gainful employment of women in general improved the social balance and endowed women with experiences for the benefit of themselves and their families. These arguments echo those by nineteenth-century feminists with the intention of reforming society through women’s participation in the public sphere. According to the postwar logic, women had a moral role in democracy, and the successful performance of their duties was based on women’s psychological satisfaction. Albeit quite exaggerated, these studies pointed at the negative effects of maternal overattention and moderated the prevailing romanticization of the devoted mother. The tenor of this psychological contemplation, however, was repressive: it reduced women to a maternal urge and glorified attributes which were becoming to women’s reproductive functions.

²³⁶ Cf. Chafe, *The American Woman*, 202-207.

4.3. Prescriptions on Education and Work

The psychological debate of female qualities was closely connected with the question of women's education and their work outside the home. Still, all studies asserting particular feminine qualities being considered here were only by implication concerned with the questions of where and how women worked, and if education and gainful employment was expedient for women at all. Because of this rather indirect treatment of these issues, a number of social scientists began to shift the academic focus from an examination of women's psychological adjustment to the investigation of their socioeconomic adaptability to modern society. This topic was certainly not new, but it reached a particular stridency in the late 1940s as tendencies among educators grew to refashion women's education in order to provide better preparation for home and family life.

In *Educating Our Daughters*, Lynn White in 1950 applied some of the findings of the discussion about woman's nature.²³⁷ What he cautiously announced in his preface as proposals for the misguided development in women's higher education proved to be a vehement offensive against feminist and liberal circles, which insisted on giving both sexes an identical education. Starting with the social discrepancies between the life patterns of men and women, White went on to explicate these differences with the innate physical and mental abilities of men and women. According to White's binary scheme, men's contribution to society was based on their "egotistic individualism, creativity, innovation, . . . abstract construction, quantitative thinking," while women's natural capacities revealed a "sense of persons, of the immediate, of intangible qualitative relationships, an aversion for statistics and quantities."²³⁸ Although culturally inferior to men, White argued, women's contribution to society lay in their "preoccupation with conserving and cherishing."²³⁹ This did not imply that women were mentally inferior to men, but that women needed an education which considered women's peculiar fields of interest and which prepared them for their appointed vocation in society. Given this premise, White reproved male dominated structures in university faculty, curriculum and extra-

²³⁷ Lynn White. *Educating Our Daughters*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950. Lynn White, President of Mills College, originally presented his ideas to the American Association of University Women in 1947. The negative reactions of the audience could not deter him from elaborating his theses in a book.

²³⁸ White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 49.

²³⁹ White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 64.

curricular activities. The consequence was that coeducational colleges undermined the women students' self-respect, because these colleges lacked female role models among the faculty or that they defeminized the students "by the masculine attitudes and values which dominate the educational world."²⁴⁰ Current college education cut women off from their true vocation as mothers, because they instilled in women the masculine wish for a career, instead of fostering their craving for motherhood.

White felt compelled to outline his ideas of how a distinctively feminine education should look. He was convinced that it was the interest of women in social relationships which produced new academic departments like sociology, psychology and anthropology - although White could not prove his thesis. Because of their practical aptitudes, he claimed, women were also most talented in the "minor" or manual arts, such as ceramics and textiles, and therefore it was necessary to offer more courses in these fields. White wanted to combine some of these areas with long-established disciplines to create more interdisciplinary and unconventional types of study and to strengthen the status of these "typically feminine" fields within academia. Most important for the advanced education of women was that college offered courses dealing with "food and nutrition, textiles and clothing, health and nursing, house planning and interior decoration, garden design and applied botany, and child development" to prepare them for their most natural task of family work.²⁴¹ He stated that education should provide a woman with the skills she needed "to manage a house and keep the babies' noses blown . . . to foster the intellectual and emotional life of her family and community. . . ." ²⁴² White considered those forms of education which were of no direct practical import for the job of a mother and homemaker superfluous. He also declared that they were even dangerous, because they infused women with a masculine scale of values, and thus represented a constant source of mental disturbance and emotional discontent²⁴³. The kind of social disease White aimed to remedy became clear in his chapter "Is the Home Obsolete?". Trends in the life patterns of women increasingly revealing an inverse relationship between the level of education and the number of children which indicated that women no longer fulfilled their social responsibilities. Since education has given those who married attitudes and value-judgments which prevented them

²⁴⁰ White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 53.

²⁴¹ White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 77.

²⁴² White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 68.

²⁴³ See especially the chapter "The Frustration of Feminism". White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 18-35.

from flinging themselves with complete enthusiasm and devotion into the life pattern which they had chosen”, education advanced the destruction of the family, the home and finally the destabilization of the social order²⁴⁴. White’s point of view that the home was the “core of all society” clearly mirrored Cold War concerns, and he admitted that his “overriding fear, like that of the rest of mankind, is war.”²⁴⁵ Due to women’s dedication, the home was able to function as a fortress, and their competence in performing these tasks had to be acquired in college.

White’s theses were vehemently repudiated in Mirra Komarovsky’s *Women in the Modern World*, which was published three years after White’s book.²⁴⁶ She also addressed the question of a specific education for women and made clear that this issue had only kindled such an interest because in a changing society, the disintegrating position of women called former concepts of women’s education into question. What Komarovsky shared with other conservative and progressive analysts, was her pronouncement of a “woman problem”. However, in emphasizing the interrelationship between the difficulties of women and the transformation of society, Komarovsky clearly distanced herself from debates in psychology and psychoanalysis which linked the “woman problem” with women’s defective personality structures. Instead, concurring with Mead, she rooted the discontent among women she observed in the gap between educational ideals and social reality.

Following the different stages in women’s lives, Komarovsky revealed that women were constantly confronted with conflicting social expectations. On the one hand parents and teachers urged them to be competitive and successful, but on the other hand they were reminded to display qualities which have long been coded as feminine such as shallowness and docility. The conflict, which persisted through childhood, school and after college, had a deeply disturbing impact on feminine life and identity. It affected women’s relationships to men when a woman disguised her intelligence in order not to jeopardize her chances of marriage and maintained this image during marriage. Contrary to popular belief, housewifery did not absorb her mental capacities. The “cycle of role confusion”²⁴⁷ continued when they ventured “to

²⁴⁴ White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 101.

²⁴⁵ White, *Educating Our Daughters*, 106 and 109.

²⁴⁶ Mirra Komarovsky. *Women in the Modern World. Their Education and Their Dilemma*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953.

²⁴⁷ Chafe, *The American Woman*, 213.

combine family life with an outside occupation.”²⁴⁸ If employers hired (married) women, the work climate was seldom in favor of women workers, the salary and position were generally lower than men’s, and in addition women had to prove that they could perfectly fulfill their duties as homemakers and workers.

What was Komarovsky’s solution to this dilemma? She agreed with White that it was essential to raise the status of the housewife and also that a general educational reform was overdue. However, she made clear that White’s idea of the adjustment of women’s curricula was not the panacea he claimed it to be: “the place to inaugurate the family and human relations studies is in the men’s colleges. . . .”²⁴⁹ She passionately rejected White’s proposal which called for a distinctly feminine concept of education to meet women’s inborn interests and to prepare them better for their family jobs. To her, education had to equip students with the necessary analytical skills which enabled them to solve their difficulties. The inclusion of courses on the theory and preparation of paella and other practical courses could only be realized at the expense of other studies, and in the long run endangered the educational level of the student and college alike. For Komarovsky, college had to “provide a soil for the fullest fruition of intellectual gifts” and “help women make the best possible adjustment to current contradictions.”²⁵⁰ Clearly realizing that women’s problems and discontent would diminish as soon as the occupational segregation of men and women ceased, Komarovsky summoned educational institutions to impart ample knowledge to female students so that they were able to choose between the different alternatives in life. Finally, Komarovsky was aware of the limits of educational efforts in solving women’s problems. A solution, she claimed, would come only with a shift in social attitudes, with a redefinition of the models of masculinity and femininity and with the devaluation of those popular stereotypes of masculine and feminine aptitudes.²⁵¹

One year later, Komarovsky’s book was followed by Kate Hevner Mueller’s *Educating Women for a Changing World* which also dealt with the question of whether the education of women should be different from that of men.²⁵² In order to answer that question, Mueller at first turned to recent discussions of sex differences

²⁴⁸ Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World*, 166.

²⁴⁹ Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World*, 268.

²⁵⁰ Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World*, 288 and 289.

²⁵¹ Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World*, 288-300.

²⁵² Kate Hevner Mueller. *Educating Women for a Changing World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954.

and found that different male and female physical functions did not account for psychological variations. Obviously inspired by Simone de Beauvoir and Margaret Mead, *Educating Women for a Changing World* endorsed a feminist perspective which acknowledged that women's subordinated role was not permanent and universal and that women's problems had social and political reasons. Mueller deduced that the specific characteristics, behavior and attitudes of women in society did not derive from physiological aspects like women's childbearing function, but were set by social, political and cultural patterns.

However, Mueller claimed that presently this insight into the roots of sexual differences was hardly relevant for educational practices: "as long as tradition has it so, education must treat it as a true sex difference."²⁵³ This argument gained ground in Mueller's support of a liberal arts education for women. Statistically, a "woman's functions as mother and homemaker, at least in the present era, take priority over her functions as earner." Therefore she benefited most from an education in the arts and sciences. Basically, then, Mueller did not address the ideology of femininity and masculinity itself, but the consequences of this ideology and the frictions it entailed for women at that moment. She was mainly concerned with the solution of current conflicts which stemmed from the clash of ideology and reality. She suggested concrete ways to modernize outdated educational concepts, which did not take into account the transitions of women's needs and obligations. "Women's growth has been stunted by our American traditions. Women are fettered by prejudice, by their own ignorance," she wrote, "only a liberal education, a truly liberating experience in their education, can set them free."²⁵⁴

Like Komarovsky, Mueller noted increasing social tensions. In a society in constant flux, particularly women were obliged to find a new place and role in this changing society. In her discussion of how institutions of education could constructively deal with this situation, Mueller proved to be one of the few analysts who did not treat women as a homogeneous, but as a socially diversified group. For her, to

think in terms of one total program of education "for women" is to indulge in unforgivable oversimplification. Educators must devise many curriculums. . . . And the first step toward this is to differentiate the

²⁵³ Mueller, *Educating Women for a Changing World*, 32.

²⁵⁴ Mueller, *Educating Women for a Changing World*, 254.

sociological layers and the psychological diversities of the women for whom these curriculums will be needed.²⁵⁵

Accordingly, in her depiction of the contents and objectives of twentieth-century education, Mueller elaborated different proposals for academic subjects and disciplines. These ranged from “education for earning” to “education for leisure”, which were able to meet the various and changing needs of women.

The notion that education and work were both closely connected and bore upon women’s social status was shared by most participants in the sociological discussion of woman’s place in society. The demand for the reorganization of higher education for homemaking tasks met less unanimity. In their study *Women’s Two Roles. Home and Work*, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein expressed their opinion that the costs of a university education prohibited an educational orientation toward skills necessary for household management.²⁵⁶ On the assumption that education was the key to gratifying employment, Myrdal and Klein continued Mueller’s investigation by analyzing women’s work opportunities. Their recognition that the functions women fulfilled in society were interrelated with prevailing ideologies of their roles was significant. Both authors argued that the current ideology of domesticity necessarily led to tremendous problems, because this nineteenth-century model had never been adapted to twentieth-century living conditions.

They approached their subject from a psychological, an economic and a sociological angle to demonstrate that family life and participation in the job market were not mutually exclusive categories. Basically, Myrdal’s and Klein’s argument was informed by three ideas: firstly that women were unfulfilled because her family tasks absorbed only a part of modern woman’s time and capacities, secondly that both economic growth and higher living standards were conditional on a significant expansion of the labor force, and thirdly that the future of American families was heavily dependent on the redistribution of responsibilities and power. In view of these hypotheses, Myrdal and Klein examined the pros and cons of the gainful employment of married women. They also made reform proposals in the field of personal attitudes of men and women, structural changes on the labor market and institutional measures for reconciling family and work life.²⁵⁷ These suggestions

²⁵⁵ Mueller, *Educating Women for a Changing World*, 18.

²⁵⁶ Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein. *Women’s Two Roles. Home and Work*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956.

²⁵⁷ Myrdal and Klein, *Women’s Two Roles*, 198-236.

revealed that both authors meant to produce another, less narrow life model containing fewer contradictions for women, but they also disclosed that Myrdal and Klein did not attempt to find a new definition of woman's identity. The home remained a central focus of women's lives, but if they wanted to work - which was psychologically and economically advisable - they should be able to pursue this wish without further impediments. Those areas of employment which they recommended for women were largely traditional: cooking, teaching, management and the arts.²⁵⁸ Less explicitly than Mueller, Myrdal and Klein emphasized that women were not a homogeneous group and that their study was relevant only to a small group of educated, middle-class women. The importance of this group, the authors claimed, derived from their role of pioneering, of setting the pace for further developments.²⁵⁹

One of the few books which did make conceptual use of the awareness of women's social heterogeneity was *Workingman's Wife. Her Personality, World and Life Style* by Lee Rainwater, Richard Coleman and Gerald Handel. This study was exceptional in its explicit focus on blue-collar wives, and also in its attempt to apply sociological findings to the American economy. With this motivation the authors attempted to discover the consumption patterns of working class women in order to identify their goals and to propose effective advertising and marketing strategies for American businesses and corporations.²⁶⁰ Concentrating on a specific group of women, the authors defined at the beginning those criteria which were decisive for their study. The data they interpreted were derived from interviews with women married to blue-collar workers, having children and living in neighborhoods inhabited mainly by similar families.²⁶¹ But in doing so, the authors neglected both a woman's individual social background and, in (allegedly) adopting working class women's understanding of themselves as wives and mothers²⁶², her actual employment situation. Accordingly, in the examination of the "psychosocial world" of working class wives, Rainwater, Coleman and Handel scrutinized women's day-to-day routines, the relationship to their environment and their mother roles, without considering their reasons for seeking work and the consequences of their occupation on their roles. They portrayed working-class wives not as women of whom many were forced to

²⁵⁸ Myrdal and Klein, *Women's Two Roles*, 241.

²⁵⁹ Myrdal and Klein, *Women's Two Roles*, 195ff.

²⁶⁰ Lee Rainwater, Richard Coleman and Gerald Handel. *Workingman's Wife. Her Personality, World and Life Style*. New York: Oceana Publications, 1959.

²⁶¹ Rainwater, Coleman and Handel, *Workingman's Wife*, 16.

²⁶² Rainwater, Coleman and Handel, *Workingman's Wife*, 19.

work because of poverty, but as leisurely women who, being educationally less equipped, felt anxious, unsure and suspicious about emergent developments in society. They were exclusively devoted to “securing herself and her family from real or potential threats to their well being.”²⁶³ Despite the focus on the working class, the book offered hardly any insight into the employment situation of working-class women. It is striking that, being one of the few books which recognized the social segmentation of American society, it only did so to manipulate this group for marketing purposes.

Even though the sociological interpretation of women’s dilemmas was not entirely exempt from traditional values and beliefs, the majority of these studies represented a contrasting side to the psychological dispute about “woman’s place”. They agreed that social institutions had fortified the conflicts between the two roles of women and that institutional practices and not women had to be changed, in order to solve the contradictions of social structures.

4.4. The Exploration of Women in History

An alternative approach to “the woman question” was embodied in Mary Ritter Beard’s 1947 investigation *Woman as Force in History*, Eleanor Flexner’s *Century of Struggle* and Robert Smuts’s *Women and Work in America*.²⁶⁴ What these studies shared was their adoption of a historical point of view to illuminate the active participation of women in society. All three authors realized that social transformations in the past occurred almost concomitantly with the changing roles and activities of women.

Beard’s project was to shed a new light on alleged sexual hierarchies by proving that the notion of women’s eternal subjection to men was inaccurate and inappropriate. Beard disclosed complexities in the relationships between men and women by exploring and encountering controlling conceptions of women. These conceptions either defined women as “victims of ignorance, subordination or total

²⁶³ Rainwater, Coleman and Handel, *Workingman’s Wife*, 205. The interpretations of the interviews with working class women in many cases reveal almost as much about the researchers as about the objects of the study because many conclusions disclose middle-class values and attitudes.

²⁶⁴ Mary R. Beard. *Woman as Force in History. A Study in Traditions and Realities*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947; Eleanor Flexner. *Century of Struggle. The Woman’s Rights Movement in*

subjection”²⁶⁵ or “reduced woman to a servant of man’s biological propensities, usually suffering from neuroses besides.”²⁶⁶ Both positions concurred in asserting the universal subjection of women to men. Being positive about the ideological nature of this stance, Beard firstly probed for the origins and the extent of the idea of women’s subjection. Secondly, as opposed to the belief in the historic subjugation of women, she investigated discarded historical documents for the role of women in human society in order to disclose the vital part of women in the making of history.

Her broad review of women in ancient, medieval and modern society suggested that “women have done far more than exist and bear and rear children.”²⁶⁷ Beard stressed, “the force of woman was a powerful factor in all the infamies, tyrannies, liberties, activities, and aspirations that constituted the history of this stage of humanity’s self-expression.”²⁶⁸ That women were visible in and contributed to legal, religious, economic, social, intellectual, military, political and philosophical events and debates was a historical facet possibly useful for postwar discussions about “woman’s place”. Even though Beard did not attempt to locate her study explicitly within this debate, it clearly invalidated those theories which considered woman a dependent, “simple child of nature”, needful of male authority²⁶⁹. Instead she scrutinized historical realities which dismantled the myth of women’s mental weakness and hence constituted the basis for a new relationship between the sexes.

However, in accord with most other writers I have discussed, Beard concluded that although women had a share in “barbaric and power-hungry propensities and activities in long history, . . . women were engaged in the main in the promotion of civilian interests.”²⁷⁰ It was particularly this glorification of women’s civilizing mission which exposed Beard’s entanglement in her times. Her call for the acknowledgment of women’s age-long force, possibilities and influence and for the restoration of the equilibrium between the sexes, clearly referred to postwar anxieties. Though Beard agreed that women were “indispensable to the maintenance and promotion of civilization in the present age,” her vision of peace and democracy did not build on the subordination and domestication of women. On the contrary it was founded on

The United States. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959; Robert W. Smuts. *Women and Work in America*. New York, Morningside Heights: Columbia University Press, 1959.

²⁶⁵ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, 44.

²⁶⁶ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, 72.

²⁶⁷ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, IV.

²⁶⁸ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, 273.

²⁶⁹ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, 18f.

²⁷⁰ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, 331.

the liberal view “that woman must have the right to choose her way of life even to the point of self-centered interests.”²⁷¹

Like Beard’s examination, Flexner’s elaborate survey *Century of Struggle. The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* emphasized the significance of the past for the present. Flexner, like Beard, felt urged to fill the gaps of former historiographies which neglected or omitted women and thus presented a lopsided picture of the past. For her, the inclusion of women into historiography was a revolutionary project, because it transformed both the image of women and the practices of academic disciplines. When the book was published in 1959 and the bewilderment about women’s roles in society was heading for its climax, Flexner had recourse to the nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement. This campaign was dominated by questions similar to those of the postwar era and thus promised to provide answers to some pressing questions.

Despite the book’s rather narrow historical framework - the fight for the extension of the franchise to women between 1820 and 1920 - Flexner deemed it a weapon in the battle for women’s equality and emancipation, a step towards self-determination and independence. In this sense, she made a case for the freedom of women to develop as individuals instead of being restricted to a “feminine sphere”. *Century of Struggle* merited particular attention, because it was one of the few studies which took into account the diverse strivings and backgrounds of women in the suffrage movement. It was more than mere organizational history, because it depicted women who ignited feminism in the nineteenth-century with all their differences and desisted from reinforcing uniform images of womanhood.

In certain ways, Flexner’s review indicated a subliminal restlessness which expressed some discontent with the disparagement of women’s achievements in historical accounts and which also was directed against diminutive images of women. Robert Smuts’s 1959 *Women and Work* represented a comparable change in historiography. His historical evaluation of trends in women’s work between 1890 and 1958 was introduced with the observation that women were only counted as members of the labor force if they worked “for pay or profit.”²⁷² Despite his realization that “the home and the family remain at the center of women’s lives, and [that] the larger part of their contribution to the wealth and welfare of the nation is the work

²⁷¹ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*, 2.

²⁷² Smuts, *Women and Work*, 2 and also 158f.

they perform inside the home and without pay,”²⁷³ Smuts unfortunately used the same marginalizing definition he criticized. It ran counter to his object of revealing the transformative power of women’s activities. Therefore, even in his own account, a large part of women’s work remained invisible and was debased as irrelevant to society and economy.

Notwithstanding this exclusionary approach, Smuts was intent on capturing the differences of women in the labor force. Subdivided into three chapters, the study analyzed the nature of women’s occupations, working women’s motivations, and the relationship between employers and workers. Firstly, Smuts discovered that while the types of most women’s occupations had scarcely altered, the status of many jobs had improved and the demands of paid work had become lighter, thus attracting more married women to the labor market than ever before.²⁷⁴ But although this development “tended to eliminate sharp differences in American society,”²⁷⁵ Smuts realized that the situation of African American women had hardly changed:

Inescapably marked by color, handicapped by segregated and inadequate schools, living apart from the white community, Negro workers are still concentrated in the lowest-paid, least desirable jobs. . . . Negro women are much more likely to work than white women.²⁷⁶

However, increasing wealth made some groups of African American women withdraw from the labor market. At the same time white middle-aged married women poured into the labor market with the result that the statistical differences in the employment patterns slowly diminished.

By exploring the significance of women’s gainful employment for dominant conceptions of womanhood in the fourth chapter of his book, Smuts deliberately entered the postwar debate about women’s roles in society. Mediating between “two extreme views of women’s place in life,”²⁷⁷ that is between feminist and conservative ideals, Smuts suggested that equal opportunities had long been achieved and that the antagonism between femininity and paid employment had already been broken down by reality. Instead of clinging to anachronistic arguments for or against women’s work which were in either case characterized by a “paucity of evidence, and the preponderance of theory and assumption,” Smuts vigorously pleaded for less

²⁷³ Smuts, *Women and Work*, 3.

²⁷⁴ Smuts, *Women and Work*, 36.

²⁷⁵ Smuts, *Women and Work*, 66.

²⁷⁶ Smuts, *Women and Work*, 67.

²⁷⁷ Smuts, *Women and Work*, 137.

speculative and more scientific examinations of key issues in order to understand the changed place of women in society and the transformations it induced.²⁷⁸

In agreement with most other investigations, *Women and Work in America* affirmed that one of the defining features of women's altered situation was the dilemma between family and career, but contrary to his fellow scholars, Smuts hesitated to offer solutions to the problem. As a historian, Smuts was concerned with explaining past developments and discovering the roots of those structural changes which were responsible for the present situation. More importantly, however, he wanted to give priority to the chances the transformations entailed for society rather than emphasize the difficulties.

In spite of their different topics, Beard, Flexner and Smuts took refuge in a historical stance to promote women's equality. Tracing the societal position of women over the centuries, they found that women's share in society had always consisted of more than self-sufficient motherhood. Beard and Flexner entered the terrain of politics to reveal women's public activism while Smuts's focus on paid employment accentuated nondomestic achievements. They showed that women were individuals with many different characteristics who had over the centuries acquired a number of different functions, and hence moderated the conservative image of women as a homogeneous, subordinated group.

4.5. The Power of Scientific Models of Womanhood

Operating as a projection surface, those models of society which were promoted by different academic disciplines developed perspectives through which issues of social change that had been accelerated by World War II might be contained, contested and resolved. The search for both the roots of these changes and the future of society resulted in the discussion of the validity of former ideas on women's qualities which were revitalized across the entire political spectrum after the war. The discursive domain of womanhood consisted of diverse overlapping and sometimes conflicting projects: medical-biological, social reformist, antifeminist, industrialist-capitalist and so on. Thus there were various ways in which "femininity" was represented. In some, femininity was seen in relation to family roles, in others the

²⁷⁸ Smuts, *Women and Work*, 152.

focus was on the modern economy. While the positions formulated within these scientific studies were vital in providing the gendered context of the postwar 15 years in the US, they produced definitions of womanhood which served to stabilize precarious social and political conditions. Their common function of redistributing power and status among men and women refers these academic approaches to the realm of ideology.

The thinking on women's proper role was by no means as uniform and conservative as has been maintained by historians of American history, but was in fact fraught with some ambivalence. Advocates of biological determinism encountered those arguments about women's nature as they were furnished by psychoanalysis. Anthropological corroboration of cultural tensions coexisted with the sociologically oriented discussion of the demands of home and work. In trying to place the changes in society into a broader perspective, a somewhat liberal and a thoroughly conservative scheme of explanation emerged, which, if taken together, counterbalanced each other. On the very periphery of the discourse lay competing images of women, either as matriarchal or subjected individuals, as superior human beings or deficient creatures, as born homemaker or economic factor, as irrelevant to or leading in historical processes. But even these extremes did not simply glorify either domesticity or the progress of women. Also, their internal politics did not always appear stringent, as the conservative antifeminists occasionally brought up feminist arguments and vice versa. In his *The Natural Superiority of Women*, Montagu made the drastic proposal of enforcing part time work for married couples in order to enable men to get better access to family life and women to the labor market. The left-leaning feminist suggestion of intervening in labor market structures was positively rejected by Myrdal and Klein. They argued that necessary changes resulting in larger numbers of women wishing to work and the reduction of household work were already well under way. The transmission of controversial messages which exposed the tensions between divergent ideals prevented the dominance of extreme positions. At the same time these conflicting positions produced fissures and fractures, which surely intensified women's own ambivalence about their situation. Even those mostly dogmatic views offered possibilities for social change in that they proved to be unstable and invited opposition, dispute and revision.

The compendium of political postures, which made up the academic dispute and which was mirrored in different questions and methodologies, involved an array of

embodied practices and institutional values. Located in discrete social spaces and structured by different languages, they converged to form a new discursive code as they searched to resolve the disparity between postwar socioeconomic developments and the traditional gender system. Essentially shaping the terms of the discourse about American society, the intellectual projects presented theories which were all variations on a unitary notion of “woman”. There was basic agreement in this academic maze that one way or another the stability of American society was being tested, and at the core of most diagnoses were women. National difficulties like rising incidences of juvenile delinquency, divorce, and illegitimacy were rooted in shifting patterns of female activities, behavior and attitudes. Women were understood to be of critical importance to the preservation of social order. It was not men who occupied center stage, but women, because they were seen as the group that constituted the problem which had to be solved.

With this contention, the academic institution assumed a mediating function between women on the one hand and larger society on the other. The proclamation of a current antagonism between these two “parties” implied that that the right order was threatened and that academia was able to bring the two parties back into a stable relationship. Having its origins in social transformations, the prescriptions that were formulated by scholars in turn aimed at restoring social order and perpetuating fundamental assumptions about male/female relations, women’s psyche, and social and historical roles.

What were the meanings internal to this discursive system, and what was the outcome of this “discursive explosion”? In selecting this realm for the representation of American society, in defining social transformations in terms of an evaporating sexual order and in monitoring individual solutions to restore it, scholars suggested that postwar society was governed in exactly the way specified by the academic discourse and no other. Their mode of representing women as an unstable, jeopardized element in society in fact enacted a patriarchal ideology because it claimed women to be in opposition with men and their interests at odds with those of men. By explaining the complexity of social reality with female deviance, women were placed in a subordinate position to an authority that pretended to assume a “genderless” position, but actually represented male-oriented perspectives and interests. The transformation of women to a matter having to be evaluated by an allegedly neutral and disinterested institution, entailed that the objects of

investigation accepted and endorsed the academic discourse. By giving female recipients of the discourse the questionable choice of either identifying with the analytical-patriarchal authority or with the analyzed problem itself, these academic conceptions motivated postwar women to consent to this way of thinking about themselves. By giving the impression of providing a kind of cultural leadership, intellectuals and their discourse of womanhood positioned women to adopt those sets of values and beliefs which defined how they might understand themselves.

The explication of postwar developments which were conceived in terms of gender differences largely effaced other diverse social divisions. This homogenizing definition of womanhood was most manifest in the rampant use of the singular “woman”, which did not allow for plurality or diversity and largely rendered ways of living other than middle-class, suburban housewifery invisible. Although resulting from different sociopolitical standpoints, the fictional construct “woman” designated the distillation of diverse, but basically congruent discourses. Presupposing for example that heterosexuality and marriage were conditions to which every woman aspired, these unified sets of values provided standards against which every woman was to be measured. Even progressives like Mead, who were not unaware of the artificiality and relativity of concepts of femininity and who emphatically called for the recognition of “the great variety of human beings,”²⁷⁹ remained in their analysis within the boundaries of their own class. While at least some authors like Dingwall or Myrdal and Klein acknowledged the limited scope of their investigation and felt compelled to justify their focus on the educated elite with its role model or pioneer function²⁸⁰, neither of them changed the focus of their research or questioned the family ideal. The notion that even women who worked for wages derived their social value from home roles was most powerful. Apart from Flexner’s and Smuts’s studies, there were very few references to African American women and no mention of any other non-white group. They were evidently not an explicit part of the discussion of sexual difference. Black women had figured in earlier sociological literature on racial difference, represented by E. Franklin Frazier’s study *The Negro Family in the United States*, which characterized the black family in terms of matriarchy and immorality, and Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* which was in part strongly influenced by

²⁷⁹ Mead, *Male and Female*, 373.

²⁸⁰ Myrdal and Klein, *Women’s Two Roles*, 196.

Frazier.²⁸¹ These analyses, which always measured black women in relation to white-defined sexual norms, seemed to suffice for postwar authorities in sociology and psychology because for a long period, investigations stopped. By the 1950s, even research into race relations had nearly abandoned black women. In sociological studies, Asian American and Mexican American women were practically nonexistent until the 1970s.

Ostensibly undeterred by social determinants like class, race, sexuality or age, the theoretical discussion of women in professional circles aimed at accommodating all women in society, but in fact regulated power structures in two ways. Firstly, it joined women to men in such a way that women were placed in a dependent relationship to men. Secondly and similarly, it established hierarchies between those women who fitted with and those who departed from white-oriented ideologies of womanhood. The academic, literally exclusive treatises largely wiped out the traces of actual, unequal power relations within society and presented women instead as a homogenous group, whose members shared a common ethos. Those women whose conditions of existence made it difficult to adopt and embody the values which were supposed to make up an appropriately feminine woman were systematically put at a disadvantage in the “race” for womanhood and referred to an inferior or marginal position in society.²⁸²

Both existing contradictions within the discourse, its exclusiveness and the disparity between model and sociopolitical realities undermined the general validity of the academic assertions, judgments and demands. Though more divergent than is usually recognized, but still coherent as to crucial points, the constructions were not entirely persuasive and applicable straightaway to women of color. On the contrary, these social prescriptions ran afoul of everyday lives of minority women. I want to suggest that material reality was a primary force that pressured and undermined this discursive domain, requiring women writers of color to rework existing conceptions in

²⁸¹ E. Franklin Frazier. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1939; Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*. Other studies are John Dollard. *Caste and Color in a Southern Town*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937; Melville J. Herskovits. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harper & Row, 1945; Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey. *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro*. New York: Meridian Books, 1951.

²⁸² The term “race” is meant to clarify that womanhood was indeed a competitive, highly contested terrain which served to establish and legitimate the power relations defined by group and class interests.

textual representations by inscribing their social and historical worlds into their own texts.

Next to the exploration of the extent and the form of these discrepancies between these constructions and everyday patterns, the most useful and important field of research concerns the subject positions which expressed ways in which women responded to this clash and how they grappled with it. Residing within their ethnic communities as well as within society as a whole, women of color were constantly assured by science-based arguments that their everyday life was governed by commonsense, universal definitions of woman's relationship to man, her identity, role and history. At the same time, they were confronted with racially specific and class informed discrimination which operated to the effect that they were almost automatically disqualified from the status of being a "normal woman" and from the possibility of fulfilling white-defined gender norms. If the idealizing conceptions of womanhood, divided as their directions sometimes were, defined and measured them by exclusion and invisibility, minority women had to fill their discursive absence and assign meaning to the dominant ideologies on their own. Despite an almost exclusive reference to white women, the definitions of womanhood were not simply irrelevant for women of color, but involved the development of an alternative understanding of womanhood which was influenced by prevalent images of white womanhood and which in turn changed the discourse it entered.

The examination of material worlds and gender ideology leads to minority women's experiences, which I want to locate at a crossroads between material reality and the academic discourse about women. By writing and by inscribing their experiences in texts, minority women writers appropriated discursive space, situated themselves in the class- and colorblind academic discourse and altered the discourse that excluded them. Via the mobilization of their experiences, they set out to bridge the gap between the material circumstances of their own lives and the diffuse and often contested discourse of (white) womanhood, which was so far removed from their vital day-to-day issues that it rendered their acceptance of it and identification with it eminently difficult. An exploration of their experiences thus helps to concretize what the non-congruence of this ideology and the existing material apparatus of American society meant for Mexican American, African American and Asian American women. We might justifiably wonder whether an entire generation of women of color wholeheartedly subscribed to such an inappropriate ideal. To

examine the subject positions women of color occupied represents a fruitful method which might expose the ways in which they interpreted, subverted, or internalized this discourse.²⁸³

²⁸³ I do not wish to imply that minority women were always in the position to distinguish on a rational, conscious level between ideal and real life nor that reality and concepts are separable at all. Rather, it is necessary to realize the efficacy of discourse and material conditions in structuring the experiences of minority women.

5. Rethinking Disciplinary Boundaries

The existence of historically significant, but positively fictive texts appears to be an intractable problem for the historical profession, because it remains inadequately theorized in most historical concepts. During the past decades, the most challenging endeavors to dissolve the boundaries between texts and contexts, between textuality and reality have come from literary critics and much of the provocative rethinking has taken place outside of the history discipline. Much of this historiographical work has been done by literary critics, and I provide some exemplary interpretations in the next chapter, but first I want to discuss why historians should be interested in literature and what theoretical ends such studies might serve. This chapter presents an analysis of the ways in which literary texts in general can contribute to our understanding of the past. History and literature have never been entirely enclosed scholarly practices despite some efforts in both intellectual systems to protect the borders of one's own discipline. Rather than recapitulating the chronological development of these discussions about the connection between literature, history and society, I want to review more recent debates. The second part of this chapter suggests how questions of "experience" might expand the possibilities of an interdisciplinary historiographical and literary critical discourse. In focusing on the position of black feminist thinking as one example of how "experience" can be systematically deployed, the third part of this chapter explores at some length the necessity of inquiring into the experiences of women of color.

5.1. The Interdependence of History and Literature

In literary critical circles, a renewed interest in the interpenetration of history and literature has begun to interfere with the formalist, ahistorical approaches of deconstruction and its predecessor New Criticism.²⁸⁴ Under the highly fashionable label "New Historicism" a plethora of self-proclaimed practitioners pursues different aims and reveals multiple tendencies which altogether endeavor to change the practice of historiography. Apart from miscellaneous topics, preoccupations and

²⁸⁴ Myra Jehlen. "The Story of History Told by the New Historicism". *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies*. Eds. Günter H. Lenz, Hartmut Keil and Sabine Bröck-Sallah. Frankfurt: Campus, 1990. 308ff.

perspectives, they share according to H. Aram Veesser certain key assumptions, among others “that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices,” which, one might add, are historically specific, and “that literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably.”²⁸⁵ However disputable it is that the premises and techniques of New Historicism have originated something “new”,²⁸⁶ New Historicist critics unmask the fallacy of the contextually isolated text. In New Historicist theories, history is not the text’s background which is possibly illuminating, but aesthetically and stylistically inferior. Instead of being an explanation, history is regarded as “a problem: fact, causality, cultural unity come into question as the possible creations of hegemonic groups. Text and context are discursive in a similar way, and contribute together to cultural self-construction.”²⁸⁷ In other words, history is no longer the answer to a text’s questions, because both are subjective representations of the “real” and because both construct material and immaterial worlds to which they in turn respond. Thus New Historicism shares with cultural materialism, social history and other critical projects the concern of inserting a historical dimension into literary studies. In addition, New Historicists conceive non-literary texts as human constructs which have lost their status as unbiased and truth-telling documents.

The turn to history within literary studies is often said to be equaled by the “linguistic turn” within historiography which signifies an increasing awareness among historians of the linguistic and textual nature of history.²⁸⁸ The works by Michel Foucault and Hayden White especially have induced a process of intense questioning of the critical assumptions and techniques of historiography by pointing at the parallels between literature and history.²⁸⁹ The realization that history is essentially as narrative as literature results in the conviction that historical narratives are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the

²⁸⁵ H. Aram Veesser. “Introduction”. *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York, London: Routledge, 1989. XI.

²⁸⁶ See Newton, “History as Usual?”, 87-121 and Brook Thomas. “The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics”. *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York, London: Routledge, 1989. 182-203.

²⁸⁷ Sarah Webster Goodwin. “Cross Fire, and the Collaboration among Comparative Literature, Feminism, and the New Historicism”. *Borderwork. Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*. Ed. Margaret R. Higonnet. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press: 1994. 249.

²⁸⁸ See John Toews. “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience”. *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987): 879-907.

²⁸⁹ See for example Michel Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976; *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1. An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1980; Hayden White. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973; Hayden White. *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”²⁹⁰ Such an understanding of history challenges basic conceptualizations of historical universal “truths”, of the neutrality of scientific language and finally of the static, unchangeable meaning of language.

The consequences of this skepticism about what constitutes history is manifest in recent historical studies. Emphasis is put on the analysis of language, on the production and relatedness of experience and the material world and on the heterogeneity of all stories that finally form “history”. According to the historian Joan Scott, especially the attention to experiences has opened up

a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds, whether these constructions vaunt the political superiority of white men, the coherence and unity of selves, the naturalness of heterosexual monogamy, or the inevitability of scientific progress and economic development.²⁹¹

I will return to the historicity of experiences later, but for the moment I want to note that the interest in linguistic theory has shattered many of the premises, categories and presumptions of orthodox historiography.

Without denying the insights historians have gained from linguistic theories, the question arises if the interaction of history and literature is restricted to parallelisms in language use or if history might embrace and benefit from literature in still different ways. Basically, literary texts are as much a historical phenomenon as the American anti-Communism of the 1950s, suburbanization or the sociological theories of Talcott Parsons and are therefore eligible for historical interrogation. As such sweeping generalizations are not likely to convince trained historians of the significance of literature, it seems useful to start with the question Dominick LaCapra raises to investigate the interrelationship between history and the novel: “Why should a professional historian bother to read novels?”²⁹²

Literature is able to contribute to our understanding of the past in a rather unique way. The referential function of literary sources has usually been acknowledged even by historians because literature undoubtedly contains factual evidence on the past. Literary texts yield documentary information about everyday life, social groups,

²⁹⁰ Hayden White. “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”. *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. 82.

²⁹¹ Joan Scott. “The Evidence of Experience”. *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 776.

²⁹² Dominick LaCapra. “History and the Novel”. *History and Criticism*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985. 115.

characters and themes as well as about the authors themselves and their intended audiences.²⁹³ This way literature “serves as a window on life or developments in the past.”²⁹⁴ Such a merely documentary reading of literature encounters several substantial problems. Firstly, there can be no certainty that this piece of information about society is veracious because “the circumstances in question may have been unknown to the author, they may have been misinterpreted or consciously altered according to the author’s artistic needs or following certain literary traditions.”²⁹⁵ Secondly, if literature only provides what can be learned from other historical documents in a more direct and reliable mode, it seems to be a rather superfluous source for historiography. If literature tells “nothing new”, it can be easily replaced by other sources. And finally, reducing the interpretation of literature to the external, factual reconstruction of social worlds means to disregard the existence and importance of the “affective perception” of the historical agents.²⁹⁶ Concentrating on “verifiable” elements produces an abstract, inanimate picture of the past which not only withholds what the facts, events, and themes meant for those people who were confronted with or involved in these data, but also severely narrows potential exchanges between past and present. Therefore, it seems to be vital to find an alternate approach to literature in order to avoid the dangers of a purely documentary method and to extract from literature that sort of information which cannot be gleaned from other historical sources.

To determine the value of novels for historiography, LaCapra consults scholars as diverse as Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács, cultural philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and literary critic Lionel Trilling who all justify (in ways depending on each critic’s political position) the significance of the novel for our knowledge of history. Whether seen as a locus of internal contradiction, as an epitome of modern culture or as a transmitter of diverse perspectives and voices, these scholars clearly agree with the idea of bringing together the novel and history and challenging the lines of two traditionally separate disciplines. Both Bakhtin and Trilling agree in that the importance of the novel is derived from its presentation of a panoply of forms and discourses. For Trilling, this multiplicity is tied to the ethical function of the novel,

²⁹³ See also Arnold D. Harvey. *Literature into History*. Houndmills, London: Macmillan Press, 1988. 29.

²⁹⁴ LaCapra, “History and the Novel”, 125.

²⁹⁵ Juliane Mikoletzky. “Fiction as a Source for Social History: The Example of German Immigration Experience”. *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies*. Eds. Günter Lenz, Hartmut Keil and Sabine Bröck-Sallah. Frankfurt: Campus, 1990. 298.

because it invites the reader “to put his [or her] own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his [or her] conventional education has taught him [or her] to see it. It taught us . . . the extent of human variety and the value of this variety.”²⁹⁷ Thus from Trilling’s point of view, it is less factual evidence which makes a novel a historically relevant document, but that writers present human dimensions which more often than not widen the horizon of their readers.

Another feature of literature is linked to what Trilling describes as the agency function of the novel. In times of radical changes, literature is able to act as a “means of social orientation.”²⁹⁸ In this case a literary text addresses new situations and difficulties which an increasing number of people has to face, and offers formulae for the solution of these problems. Here literature is not simply fictive, but presents a level of reality which the readers can identify and accept and which ideally helps them to cope with unfamiliar situations. Furthermore, the urge authors feel to write about certain topics (and the urge readers feel to read about) reliably points at realms which people experience as problematic and fields of social pressure and anxiety which often, but not always, coincide with those diagnosed by historical research.²⁹⁹ Particularly when literary sources divulge information that interferes with or contradicts those findings which have been gathered from other investigations, literature is able to communicate “the *contestatory* voices and *counter*-discourses of the past.”³⁰⁰

In this sense, the realization that literature can be an important source for historical inquiry has far-reaching consequences for those areas of research which struggle with an inhibiting lack of historical sources, most notably feminist and minority studies.³⁰¹ Here, the inclusion of literature as an alternative source for analysis serves at least three interrelated purposes. Firstly, to introduce formerly invisible groups and their cultural contributions into history means to acknowledge them as historical and political actors. Secondly, studies about previously neglected groups which are based on the expressions of these groups themselves, not only

²⁹⁶ Helmut Gauss. *The Function of Fiction: The Function of Written Fiction in the Social Process*. Gent: E. Story-Scientisa, 1979. 149.

²⁹⁷ Lionel Trilling. *The Liberal Imagination. Essays on Literature and Society*. New York: Viking Press, 1950. 222.

²⁹⁸ Mikoletzky, “Fiction as a Source for Social History”, 300.

²⁹⁹ Mikoletzky, “Fiction as a Source for Social History”, 299.

³⁰⁰ LaCapra, “History and the Novel”, 132. The emphasis is mine.

³⁰¹ See for example Carmen Ramos Escandon. “Alternative Sources to Women’s History: Literature”. *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History*. Ed. Adelaida R. Del Castillo. Encino: Floricanto Press, 1990. 201-212.

expose both the partiality and blindness of traditional historiography, but successfully destroy prevalent stereotypes of them. Thirdly, the focus on and acceptance of differences as they are manifest in dissimilar and dissenting voices is a necessary step toward the rejection of cultural and political hegemonies and also a step toward a change of the practices of historiography. Without totalizing the differences, an attention to the diverse literary voices of the past (and present) is able change the focus of history and to document the complexities of our past and present. Reading literature for historical analysis is less a matter of confirming what has already been discovered by historians. Of course, literary texts provide factual information, the correctness of which can be checked, but the value of literary texts lies in their potential to exhibit the meaning of social systems and establish a basis for a critical dialogue with the past.

5.2. Possibilities and Limits of “Experience”

The use of literature for historical analysis proves to be fruitful for those projects which are intended to challenge normative history by inserting the lives and activities of those ignored and omitted in traditional accounts of the past. Originally turning to literature because of a want of other historical sources, these historians have started expanding the range of sources and criticizing the epistemology and methodology of mainstream history.

Climactically, this reassessment entails reflections on the nature and definition of history itself. Debates around such questions as “Is it possible to say what happened in the past, to get the truth, to reach objective understandings . . .? What are historical facts (and indeed are there such things)?”³⁰² indicate that historians are entering a innovative and tension-laden new phase in which they reconsider who and what makes up history.

As one consequence, historians start to connect historical processes and structures with acting human beings, whose manifold cultural expressions reveal how they fathomed, appropriated and changed their social realities. Because of this increasing sensitivity to aspects of social, political and personal experience, I want to examine the ways in which “experience” has been understood and employed to

³⁰² Keith Jenkins. *Re-Thinking History*. London, New York: Routledge, 1991. 3f.

locate both the productivity and the difficulties of this category of historical explanation.

An etymological analysis of the term experience can show its almost contradictory layers of meaning in the past.³⁰³ Though “experience” as an analytical category has proved to be elusive and shaky, it has become a most fashionable category of scientific examination since the 1970s.³⁰⁴ Despite the various reasons why scholars began to probe “experience”, the roots of the almost endemic turn to “experience” are mostly political. As a reaction to elitist theories, historians tried to encounter the dangers of scientific abstractions and institutional estrangement with a focus on individual consciousness and awareness.³⁰⁵ “Experiences” promised to be a more democratic form of social knowledge in which common people stood at the center of scholarly attention.

Feminist critique and theory today concentrate on the two alternative modes in which “experience” has been utilized in historical and sociological discourses. The first is summed up by Raymond Williams as “knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection.”³⁰⁶ In other words, experiences constitute an (independent) source of knowledge. In relation with areas of historical research, such a definition of experience grants historians a position of authority and expertise because by virtue of their experiences they have developed a dispassionate and objective knowledge of the past. Feminist theorists challenge such an understanding of “experience” as experiential knowledge. Though

³⁰³ Michael Pickering describes the history of the term as follows: “Etymologically, the term *experience* derives via Middle English and Old French from the Latin *experientia*, which was itself related to *experior*, trying or proving, from the root *peri*, ‘try’, hence the connection to *peritus*, experienced, practised, skilled, that is having learned by trying or trying out. The historical connection with the word *experiment*, in the sense of putting to the test, is thus clear, but while *experiment* became more directly the test itself, *experience* came to refer also to a consciousness of an effect or state. The threads variously converge, intertwine and diverge, both within and across languages. ... From the sixteenth century, the association of the term with the past became more prominent, as in ‘the tried and tested’, and the word was increasingly used to denote knowledge based upon historical events or particular observation. The link with *experiment* has been retained, however, in a further association with *empirical*, as in ‘testing by empirical means’, that is attaining proof by direct observation or replicable demonstration.” Michael Pickering. *History, Experience and Cultural Studies*. Houndmills, London: Macmillan Press, 1997. 92.

³⁰⁴ See for example Edward P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*. 1963. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979; Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung - Zur Organisationsanalyse bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972; Eugene D. Genovese. *Roll Jordan Roll*. New York: Pantheon, 1974.

³⁰⁵ Karin Hartewig. “‘Wer sich in Gefahr begibt, kommt [nicht] darin um’, sondern macht eine Erfahrung. Erfahrungsgeschichte als Beitrag zu einer historischen Sozialwissenschaft der Interpretation”. *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte: zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte*. Ed. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1994. 115.

³⁰⁶ Raymond Williams. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York, London: Fontana Press, 1983. 126.

they rely on similar notions of experience as an essential site of knowledge, they object to supposed claims to value-neutrality, universal validity, rationality and objectivity which result from the scientific experiences and specialized faculties of the historian³⁰⁷.

In her important book on feminist epistemologies, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Sandra Harding argues that not only in the social, but also in the natural sciences “masculine bias is evident in both the definition of what counts as a scientific problem and in the concepts, theories, methods, and interpretations of research.”³⁰⁸ Harding exposes the androcentrism of all scientific discourses, that is that all purportedly rational, impartial and detached inquiries are heavily informed by the scholar’s gendered perception and identity. Thus feminist criticism shows that claims to objectivity are dependent on an artificial boundary between epistemological subject (researcher) and epistemological object (object of research) which indeed does not exist.

The existence of “experience” does not ensure autonomous, objective results of research. On the contrary, the observer’s experience and identity generally distort his or her concepts, methods and interpretations. That object and subject form an interdependent unit leads to a redefinition of scholarly experience, to an alternative and more dynamic understanding of the relationship between object and subject and finally to a “epistemologic dismemberment of disciplinary certainty, academic rationality, and the grounding of knowledge.”³⁰⁹

In conclusion, “experience” as described by Williams, should be neither the unquestioned basis of historical investigation nor the accepted foundation of scholarly authority. Instead, it should be regarded as a problem, as an indication of

³⁰⁷ See for example Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.). *New French Feminism. An Anthology*. New York: Schocken Books, 1981; Kathleen Canning. “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn”. *Signs* 19.2 (1994): 398-404; Catherine Waldby. “Feminism and Method”. *Transitions. New Australian Feminisms*. Eds. Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle. New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1995. 15-28; Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, 773-797.

³⁰⁸ Sandra Harding. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1986. 82.

³⁰⁹ Isabel V. Hull. “Feminist and Gender History Through the Literary Looking Glass: German Historiography in Postmodern Times”. *Central European History* 22.3/4 (December 1989): 286. See also Evelyn Fox-Keller. *Reflections of Gender and Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985; Barbara Caine, Elizabeth Grosz and M. de Lepervanche. *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988; Donna Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

where the historian is positioned: who the historian is, what the historian's relationship to others is and what political consequences are envisaged.³¹⁰

The focus on a different sense of "experience" results from efforts to reclaim the lives and voices of subjugated or invisible groups. The second usage of "experience" as it has emerged in recent historiographic debates is summarized by Williams as "a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge'."³¹¹ This definition of "experience" is radically different from the first in that it is not linked to objectivity, but rather to the personal, emotional and subjective forms of thought. Here, the emphasis is put on the whole being, a wholeness that refers to those configurations of consciousness which are not abstract but concrete and immediate in character. It is such an understanding of individual "experience" which has rightly become a key theme in contemporary feminism, though, as I shall demonstrate, as an analytical tool it should be used conscientiously. "Experience" as an analytic category for historiography is most appealing, but some difficulties involved in taking "experience" as the point of departure for understanding the past are more complex than might appear at first sight.

When mainly feminists proclaimed the oft-cited but still valid slogan "the personal is political," this declaration was of consequence for women's history in significant ways, because it inevitably went along with the consideration of both new critical terms and new sources or data. By replacing objectivity with subjectivity, and homogeneity with multiplicity, especially feminist and minority scholars have begun to pay increasing attention to manifestations of "the personal."³¹² Feminist historians are engaged in working out alternative analytical frameworks³¹³. They start from the assumption that the preoccupation of mainstream history with impersonal structures and processes - which is guided by a male perspective, by male interests and needs - has little to say about social relations and how they are perceived.

In the last decade there has been an extensive critique of what is thought to be a central feature of conventional historiography: the disposition to efface personal and group-specific experiences, practices and interpretations in favor of abiding

³¹⁰ Scott, "The Evidence of Experience", 783.

³¹¹ Williams, *Keywords*, 126.

³¹² See for example Liz Stanley and Sue Wise. *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*. London: Routledge, 1983

³¹³ Harding describes in detail in which ways masculine bias has permeated the social sciences. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, 82-110.

structures and larger social patterns. Instead of pursuing so-called grand theories like traditional historians, feminist as well as other “new historians”³¹⁴ focus on the mute masses and uncover “lost” or “non-existent” histories. They address “experience” as the site at which allegedly universal and omnipotent structures assume their actual meaning for the historical subjects. This focus shows a renewed interest in the ordinary human being and its subjectivity. For feminist historians, “experience” is pre-eminently shaped by gender relations. Despite all differences among women, social and historical changes are supposed to have always affected women in a distinctive way, so that their experiences are pervasively structured by their gender. A rather unpretentious conclusion of what the analysis of women’s collective experiences might contribute to historiography would be that they challenge, complement or correct historical accounts made without the consideration of gender. Much more radical is the claim that “women[’s actions and experiences] can’t just be added on without a fundamental recasting of the terms, standards and assumptions of what has passed for objective, neutral and universal history in the past because that view of history included in its very definition of itself the exclusion of women.”³¹⁵

To take individuals and their experiences as the basis of historical practice implies “that subjects do have some kind of agency.”³¹⁶ Via experience, individuals mediate, contest or perpetuate the conditions of daily life, in other words intervene in social structures. To attend to women’s experiences discloses how women are involved in structures because their experiences act upon each gesture of consent and resistance they make. For the historian, the attention to women’s experiences inevitably involves a change of perspective, because women who voice their experiences “sometimes speak against the grain of subject-positions assigned to them. . . .”³¹⁷ Thus women can no longer be seen as simply acted upon, but as actors whose activities affect their own social worlds. Their gendered experiences are closely linked to social life in that individuals and their experiences are shaped by

³¹⁴ Peter Burke uses the term “new historians” for all those who reflect critically the inadequacies of mainstream historiography and consequently turn to new objects of research and rethink historical explanation. Peter Burke. “Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future”. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Ed. Peter Burke. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. 1-23.

³¹⁵ Joan Scott. “Women’s History”. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Ed. Peter Burke. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. 58.

³¹⁶ Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn”, 377.

³¹⁷ Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies*, 212.

social preconditions, but that these conditions are also informed by those modes in which women express their experiences.

Recently, such a universalizing understanding and use of the term experience has come under some attack. This criticism was directed primarily at the problem of defining, interpreting and explaining “experience”. It is an all but cryptic word which has greatly varying meanings such as knowledge, empirical wisdom, intuition, confirmation, feeling, inner voice, trauma or the rendering of meaning. This indeterminacy adds to the historians’ difficult task to capture “experience”. One methodological problem is the temporal character of “experiences” as they are not simply cumulative, not chronologically determinable³¹⁸. Different experiences can overlap and eclipse each other. They are subject to new hopes and expectations and it is difficult to distinguish between original and later assignments of meaning.³¹⁹ Another related problem concerns the reliability and transparency of the historical voice. In which ways the researcher trusts and takes as self-evident the historical text, depends not only on the political creed of the historian, but also on the ways in which the account has been shaped by the intent of the speaker.

Michael Pickering insists on the emancipatory function of “experience”.³²⁰ The analyst’s intention to give centrality to the experiences of marginal groups in historiography is sometimes accompanied by the wish to reconstruct “how it really happened”. That this reconstruction of “real life” might result in one-dimensional romanticism refers again to the issue of the historian’s ideological position. Because the historian cannot assume a simplifying one-to-one relationship between social reality and experiential reality, there is a lot of open space for different translations or explanations. Thus for instance the *overemphasis* of agency and autonomy leads to inaccuracy, insofar as it obscures all forms of identification with or participation in hegemonial systems, and also the object-positions of historical subjects and the experiences of suffering that accompany them.³²¹

Because many feminist theories proclaim the desideratum of a global solidarity of women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the way in which they tend to postulate the universality of women’s experiences and to dismiss all differences within feminist

³¹⁸ Reinhard Kosellek. *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984. 358.

³¹⁹ See Hartewig, “Wer sich in Gefahr begibt”, 114f ; Hermann Bausinger. “Erlebte Geschichte - Wege zur Alltagshistorie”. *Saeculum* 43.1 (1992): 101f.

³²⁰ Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies*, 209ff.

³²¹ Hartewig, “Wer sich in Gefahr begibt”, 118.

discourses.³²² Mohanty discerns that feminist theories can hardly do without these homogenizing tendencies. Only the invariable reiteration of an essential “woman’s experience” originates in a feminist consciousness and lends feminism its argumentative and explanatory force.

Her comparison of two different approaches to women’s experiences reveals the dangers which arise if “experience” is not historically interpreted and theorized. Mohanty identifies four points at issue which emanate directly from an undifferentiated use of “experience”. Firstly, it disguises the differences in the forms of oppression and struggle. Secondly, it either erases the history and effects of contemporary imperialism or equates imperialism and patriarchy. Thirdly, it denies women’s agency and finally, it sustains the bourgeois ideology of individualism. Accordingly Mohanty rejects the notion of a global woman’s experience which “can create an illusory unity, for it is not the experience of being woman, but the meanings attached to gender, race, class and age at various historical moments that is of strategic significance.”³²³

The most profound critique of the category of experience has been formulated by Joan Scott. Her essay “The Evidence of Experience” takes up and elaborates Mohanty’s critical remarks, although the direction of Scott’s arguments is somewhat different from Mohanty’s.³²⁴ There is much that can be said about Scott’s poststructuralist viewpoint of “experience”, and therefore I cannot do justice to her multilayered essay, but I want to focus on those points which are directly related to my line of argument.

Scott’s critique turns especially to those historians who see their task in “documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past.”³²⁵ Like Mohanty, Scott worries about her fellow scholars’ proclivity to essentialize and

³²² Chandra Talpade Mohanty. “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience”. *Destabilizing Theory. Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Eds. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. 74-92. See also Denise Riley. *‘Am I that Name?’ Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’*. Houndmills, London: Macmillan, 1988. In contrast to Mohanty, Riley rests more comfortably with the notion of “experience” than with the designation “women”, because she fears that the universalization of “women” - which operates by using women’s bodies as a sign for their principal otherness - serves as a vehicle to maintain, not to combat women’s subordinate social positions. But since Riley realizes that both “experience” and “woman” are indispensable categories for historical analyses, she tries with her book to conjure up “a willingness, at times, to shred this ‘women’ to bits - to develop a speed, foxiness, versatility” to embrace “the fragilities and peculiarities of the category”. Riley, *‘Am I that Name?’*, 114.

³²³ Mohanty, “Feminist Encounters”, 86.

³²⁴ Mohanty’s essay was originally published in 1987. Cf. her essay in *Copyright 1* (Fall 1987): 30-44.

³²⁵ Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, 776.

naturalize the categories on which historical accounts are based.³²⁶ Scott similarly underlines that “a single definition of women’s experience [is] impossible”³²⁷ and thus objects to those investigations that take a universal “woman’s experience” which transcends the boundaries of other social categories for granted. Such an unquestioning use of “experience” of socially invisible groups, which are assumed to be shaped by their “otherness”, is deficient in several ways. Firstly, as Scott states, the presupposition of “experience” as an absolute, transparent resource transforms individuals and groups into naturally different objects. As long as experiences themselves do not become the center of critical interrogation, historiographies of difference reproduce otherness with its negative connotation. This helps neither to generate a more positive sense of identity nor to resist the social and political inequalities in which experience is grounded. Secondly, the use of “experience” can buttress existing oppressive systems. “Women’s experience” is, as Pickering says,

so deeply structured by categories of differentiation, which assign people into given subject-positions through the discursive practices of ascribing immutable characteristics of body, intellect and identity to them, that the attempt to make it culturally and historically visible inevitably reproduces the terms used in the ideological construction of its difference.³²⁸

Thirdly, Scott criticizes that the documentation of different realities by interpreting the experiences of marginal groups remains within the methodological confines of traditional historiography. Based on the examination of how the use of “experience” as the starting point of explanation has prevented an analysis of its formation and workings, Scott infers that like past events or structures, “experience” has come to represent another foundationalist category which substitutes for former interpretations and now makes claims to exclusive validity and truth. Thus “experience” fits neatly into the historiographical procedure of replacing old evidence with new without asking “how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.”³²⁹ At this point it becomes clear that the historian who turns to the category of “women’s experiences” has to face some substantial problems, namely:

³²⁶ It seems to me that feminist theories can roughly be divided into two dominant strains. On the one hand, there are feminist standpoint theories which emphasize women’s unique and unified position in society, and on the other hand feminist discourse-oriented theories which criticize the totalizing effects of feminist theories and which deconstruct instead the terms on which women’s difference is built.

³²⁷ Scott, “Women’s History”, 59f.

³²⁸ Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies*, 209.

³²⁹ Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, 777.

how to invoke “experience” without implicitly endorsing essentialized concepts; how to describe political mobilization without appealing to essentialized, ahistorical identities; how to depict human agency while acknowledging its linguistic and cultural determination; how to incorporate fantasy and the unconscious into studies of social behavior; how to recognize differences and make processes of differentiation the focus of political analysis without either ending up with unconnected, multiple accounts or with overarching categories like class or “the oppressed”; how to acknowledge the partiality of one story (indeed of all stories) and still tell it with authority and conviction.³³⁰

These reflections suggest methodological aporias, but I want to suggest that the problems Scott envisions are soluble. Despite, or even because of, those difficulties the concept “experience” raises, it still represents one of the most stimulating units of historical analysis. Of course, there is no simple recipe for how to avoid the traps of the category “experience”, which doubtlessly exist, and succeed in reconstructing the past from the perspective of the historical actors.³³¹

Basically, the meaning of “experience” needs to be attended to in terms of challenging both the concepts and the methods of current historiography. If historians want to understand and make understandable the nature of historical realities, they cannot dismiss fundamental dimensions of social worlds simply because this would involve problems. “History consists in something more than ‘just one damn thing after another’,” argues Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.³³² It also exists in people whose experiences mediate between subjectivity and social reality. “Experience” connects the social and the political with the personal and individual without supporting the dichotomies so beloved by some feminists. It introduces a hitherto missing dimension into history which more often than not contests the other ones and hence invalidates all monocausal explications of historical change. It is only the competing accounts of previously neglected voices which permit the

³³⁰ Scott, “Women’s History”, 60.

³³¹ There are already several excellent examples which illuminate what such a “tight-rope walk” might look like. See Susanne Lebsock. *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784- 1860*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1984; Hazel V. Carby. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; Janet Wolff. *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995; Catherine Hall. *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; Anne McClintock. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York, London: Routledge, 1995.

³³² Despite this realization, social historian Fox-Genovese makes clear that she prefers structure and politics to experience and textuality. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. “Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism”. *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York, London: Routledge, 1989. 213-224.

breakdown of the master plots and categories and their claims of universal significance.

As both Mohanty and Scott have clarified, it is not sufficient to use “experience” as an explanatory category because “experience” itself requires explanation. To make different experiences visible is an elementary step for historians, but one which should interlock with exposing experiences as ideologically or culturally constructed. While Scott asserts that the first step automatically obscures the other one, I would rather insist that it is possible and necessary to explore how people experience (their difference) *and* how their difference is produced to serve hegemonial systems. To limit the interrogation of “experience” to its linguistic representations and discursive construction is to drain “experience” of its political and material determinants. Consequently, an investigation of historical “experience” should be led on both levels. An experiential social history takes as a starting point what marginal voices present as their own experiences, and attempts to understand them in terms of their specific conditions. Secondly, it scrutinizes the rhetorical and discursive environment in which experiences of difference are constructed and conveyed. Such an analysis reveals the processes with which people assign meaning to events or facts as they live through them. In particular, this second *modus operandi* might prove helpful, because it avoids the fallacy that cultural products arise completely out of absolute consciousness and thus turn into vehicles of pure intention. While the first step considers the intentions of people in the past, the second neglects what people want to communicate and focuses instead on verbal evidences of ideologies and “alter-ideologies”³³³. “Alter-ideologies” concentrate on the terms and categories which signify, reinforce and resist existing hierarchies and their operational notions of inferiority and superiority.

On the surface, the disclosure of a text’s intrinsic ideology and its inner logics appears to undermine all authorial designs. But exactly the exploration both of subjective truth and of the process within which “categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities)”³³⁴ generate subjectivity, can show the alternative, resistant spaces within discourses and experiences. Moreover, the attention to both levels of analysis reveals their interdependency: it is not only that individuals make use of those

³³³ The term alter-ideology is used by Göran Therborn in his *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*. London: NLB, 1980. 28.

³³⁴ Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, 778.

categories by which difference is constituted, but also that the intervention of differing agents transforms fixed hegemonic systems into “contingent” and “permeable” ones.³³⁵

While “experience” embraces individual and collective reactions to historical circumstances and makes the past come alive in a more meaningful way, it is simultaneously an excellent means of illuminating the inadequacies and blind spots of large scale historiographical interpretations. This does not mean that an experiential social history should replace all other approaches to the past, but it can be regarded as a tool to interconnect lives, events and cultures. Historical situations cannot be completely comprehended in terms of individual or collective experiences. Still, the concept of “experience” helps us to understand why and how people have dealt with social systems and contributed to particular historical processes.

5.3. Theorizing Experiences of Difference

So far I have traced the ways in which the concept of “experience” might change the directions of current historiography without looking at the “experiences” of women of color in particular. It would be useful at this point to address the issue of why and how women of color theorize the specificity of their experiences. Or to put the matter differently, why is it necessary to scrutinize their experiences analytically and to examine explicitly what significance they have (for other historical agendas)? In what follows I will mainly rely on debates among black feminists. Of course, “experience” has been widely employed, not only by black feminist critics. I will concentrate in the following chapter largely on the deliberations of three African American critics, because they have very early, frequently and extensively formulated theoretical ideas.

From the beginning, discussions of black feminist theories and criticisms analyzed the utter absence of black women in literary and critical practices. In her seminal 1977 essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”, Barbara Smith not only attacked the literary establishment for its repressive mechanisms, but also underlined the need to listen to black women’s (literary) voices.³³⁶ These voices, Smith argues,

³³⁵ Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn”, 377.

³³⁶ Barbara Smith. “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”. *Conditions: Two* 1.2 (October 1977): 25-44. Rpt. in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave. Black Women’s*

provide an incisive perspective on systems of oppression because “the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers.”³³⁷ The positions of black women are thus conditioned by interrelated systems of subordination.

Inspired by Smith’s notion of the “simultaneity of oppression,”³³⁸ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson proposes a model to grasp what informs both black women’s subjectivity and black women’s discourse: a “dialogic of difference and dialectic of identity.”³³⁹ With the term dialogic of differences, which is derived from Bakhtin, Henderson refers to a process in which black women’s subjectivity develops as a product of internalized different and negotiating voices. The “internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity” enables black women to speak in a plurality of gendered and racialized voices and produces relationships of difference as well as identification with the “other(s).”³⁴⁰ However, in this model, competition and conflicts with the other(s) prevail. Henderson cites the example of Audre Lorde who stressed her identity as a black, lesbian, feminist, poet, mother and - like other black women - entered into a competitive discourse “with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women” to communicate difference verbally.³⁴¹

The aspect of mutuality and reciprocity, which characterizes black women’s relationships, is captured by the term dialectic of identity. Building on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s dialectical model of conversation as a complementary concept to Bakhtin’s, Henderson discovers a second key to black women’s subjectivity which is

Studies. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982. 157-175. I will not offer a close reading of Smith’s essay, because it has already been dealt with in detail. Moreover, I think that a deconstructionist reading of Smith’s essay, like Deborah G. Chay’s, does Smith’s essay gross injustice. This approach mainly fails to read it in the historical and political context of the late 1970s. Cf. Deborah G. Chay. “Rereading Barbara Smith: Black Feminist Criticism and the Category of Experience”. *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 635-652 and Barbara Smith. “Reply to Deborah Chay”. *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 653ff.

³³⁷ Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”, 159.

³³⁸ Barbara Smith (ed.). *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983. xxxii.

³³⁹ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson. “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition”. *Changing Our Own Words. Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. 1989. London: Routledge, 1990. 19 and 21.

³⁴⁰ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 18.

³⁴¹ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 20. Without using the term experience, Gloria Anzaldúa develops a similar understanding of the *mestiza* consciousness which results from a collision of heterogeneous voices within Mexican American women. Therefore the *mestiza* consciousness is a flexible, borderless consciousness which is characterized by its “tolerance for ambiguity”. Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands: the New Mestiza = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987. 77-91.

evident in a “language of consensus, communality, and even identification.”³⁴² The complex subjectivity of black women is rooted in the ability to understand and acknowledge the other with whom they “share a common history, language, and culture.”³⁴³ According to Henderson, at this point black women challenge the dominant values by giving priority to a discourse of race and gender identity (or difference) in the “subdominant discursive order.”³⁴⁴

Taken together, these two approaches, applied to black women’s subjectivity, form what Henderson calls the “simultaneity of discourse” or, translated into a black idiom, “speaking in tongues”. This means that on the one hand black female experience is based on the multiplicity and plurality of voices or speech, while on the other it strives toward an understanding of and identification with others. Through their experiences, that is “their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women . . . weave into their work competing and complementary discourses - discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns.”³⁴⁵ In the different forms in which they express their specific experiences, black women are able to convey a diversity of discourses. Their position of the outsider within empowers them “to see the other, but also to see what the other cannot see, and to use this insight to enrich both our own and the other’s understanding.”³⁴⁶

While Henderson tries to explain how black women invoke their experiences to create a position from which to speak, Patricia Collins primarily investigates the social reasons for and psychological consequences of personal experiences of difference. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, she addresses the category of experience at length, with the intention of conceptualizing black women’s standpoints.³⁴⁷ According to Collins, two crucial elements feature in black feminist thought: firstly, “those experiences and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society” and secondly the (theoretical) interpretation of these experiences.³⁴⁸ This way, the black feminist

³⁴² Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 20.

³⁴³ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 20.

³⁴⁴ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 20f.

³⁴⁵ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 23.

³⁴⁶ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues”, 36.

³⁴⁷ Patricia Collins. *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Perspectives on Gender 2*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

³⁴⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 22.

position is both embedded in daily experiences and constructed by those theorists who reflect on black women's experiences.

Collins's notion of "experience" is expressly group-oriented. She argues that basically all African American women have the same "experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent."³⁴⁹ Collins connects black women's common experiences and specialized ideas which make up the feminist standpoint with systemic inequality insofar as these experiences and ideas are intertwined with black women's "shared location" in hierarchical power relations.³⁵⁰ Although various factors as diverse as class, sexual preference, ethnicity, region, urbanization and age contribute to generate diversity among black women, certain realities have a permanence over time and produce group experiences that transcend those of the individual. Therefore Collins claims that standpoint theory is less concerned with "individual experiences within socially constructed groups than [with] the social conditions that construct such groups."³⁵¹

The concrete experiences of black women intersect at certain points and originate in a variety of key themes which then are foregrounded by black feminist thought. Collins identifies these "binding threads" and characteristic themes: the legacy of struggle, the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression, stereotyped images of black womanhood (which are to be replaced with self-defined images), black women's activism, and sexual politics.³⁵²

However, that African American women's experiences evince an Afrocentric structure is considered by Collins the most distinguishing feature of black women's experiences.³⁵³ And it is at this point that Collins's and Henderson's studies of black women's experience converge. Collins reveals how the different experiences as blacks and as women make them both insider and outsider. Her term "dialectics of Black womanhood", which is borrowed from Bonnie Thornton Dill, signifies black women's ability to fuse these differences and use them creatively.³⁵⁴ This unique element of black women's experiences and consciousness³⁵⁵ is reinforced by the Afrocentric "belief in connectedness and the use of dialogue" which is visible in the

³⁴⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 22.

³⁵⁰ Patricia Collins. "Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited': Where's the Power?". *Signs* 22.2 (1997): 376.

³⁵¹ Collins, "Comment", 375.

³⁵² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 23.

³⁵³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 201-220.

³⁵⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 207.

call-and-response pattern in African American discourses.³⁵⁶ Like in Henderson's model, Collins delineates how black women develop a specific form of dialogue in which harmony, agreement and verbal support predominate. It is especially this dialogic discourse mode which, together with the ethic of caring and personal accountability, makes the experiences of black women so valuable for theoretical projects.

Collins explicitly grounds black women's experiences in the political context of domination and subjugation. Because her standpoint theory is developed for African American women readers, she calls for placing the experiences of black women at the center of analyses. By disclosing the interdependence of experiences, consciousness and empowerment, she wants to encourage black women to work for social, political and economic transformation. Yet, Collins states, black women's standpoints, which rest on black female experiences and ideas, can be pathbreaking for the landscape of theory and criticism in essential ways:

A Black women's standpoint may provide a preferred stance from which to view the matrix of domination because, in principle, Black feminist thought as specialized thought is less likely than the specialized knowledge produced by dominant groups to deny the connection between ideas and the vested interests of their creators.³⁵⁷

While Collins warns not to regard black women's standpoints as possessing privileged access to "objectivity" and "truth", she assigns the insider/outsider angle of black women and their experiences immense significance because of their "potential power to reveal new insights about the matrix of domination."³⁵⁸ If understood as a series of interactive inequalities, this matrix denounces the primacy of gender as *the* analytic category. It emphasizes that depending on their specific embeddedness in the hierarchical social order, on varying circumstances and resources, women experience "race", class, gender and sexuality, differently.³⁵⁹ These categories are not simply additive factors, but variables, the workings and meanings of which have to be plumbed anew in representations of black women's lives.

Bell Hooks has approximated the specificity of black female experiences from yet another perspective by exploring the interrelation between postmodernism and

³⁵⁵ For Collins, experience and consciousness are mutually dependent. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 24f.

³⁵⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 212f.

³⁵⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 234.

³⁵⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 234.

experiences of difference.³⁶⁰ In her discussion of the significance of postmodernist discourses Hooks notices that many African American critics refuse to engage in postmodernist debates, because the questions and terminologies used in these approaches apparently have nothing in common with black experiences.³⁶¹ Hooks criticizes tendencies within postmodern theories in which experiences of difference serve as an alibi to prove the political content of the discourse. Despite the concern with “otherness” and the challenge of existing hegemonies, postmodernist theories are inclined to ignore black women and their experiences. She fears that both the absence of African American theorists in postmodern discussions and the insignificance of black women’s experience for postmodernist analysis fosters dichotomies and sustains racism, because “blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived as either oppressing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory.”³⁶² Hooks problematizes two related subjects which are central in postmodernist theory and practice, but which have to be reassessed in terms of race *and* gender in order to be radical and transformative: rhetorical “mastery”, and the critique of identity and essentialism. Because the latter issue bears most directly on the category of experience, I will focus attention on Hooks’s reevaluation of the critique of identity and essentialism.

The critique of identity, which has been elaborated to contest notions of static and universal identity, is relevant for African Americans in opposite ways. While realization of difference and otherness proposes new interpretations of black (female) experience, it poses fundamental problems in terms of losing political ground for collective resistance.

Hooks hails the postmodernist repudiation of essentialist conceptions of identity as potentially liberating for blacks. Because African Americans “have too long had imposed upon [them] from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness,” postmodernist thought “can open up new possibilities for the

³⁵⁹ See also Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill. “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism”. *Feminist Studies* 22.2 (Summer 1996): 326ff.

³⁶⁰ Bell Hooks. “Postmodern Blackness”. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990. 23-31.

³⁶¹ Barbara Christian has developed a similar critique. In contrast to Hooks, Christian dismisses deconstruction as having little relevance for black feminist projects. Barbara Christian. “The Race for Theory”. *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (Spring 1988): 67-79.

³⁶² Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”, 510f.

construction of self and the assertion of agency.”³⁶³ Like Henderson and Collins, Hooks wants to destabilize the dominance of the category “race” which, as she makes clear, intersects with the category of class and leads to a variety of black experiences and a multiplicity of identities. To point at the heterogeneity of blacks is for Hooks an effective strategy of fighting against racism, because it undermines the stereotypical idea of an authentic black experience, which in its normative and one-dimensional configuration, helps to perpetuate race inequalities.³⁶⁴

For Hooks, black identity is tied to being different from the dominant group and therefore to racism. The postmodernist insistence on dismissing the validity of identities and experiences precludes the possibility of solidarity and collective resistance. Common conditions and shared experiences of “displacement, profound alienation and despair”³⁶⁵ forge a specific identity. Being a precondition for solidarity, coalition and resistance struggle, “identity” is something blacks and especially black women cannot renounce.

Hooks’s position can be summed up as follows: on the one hand, the interplay of race, gender and class creates a multiplicity of black experiences. On the other hand, African Americans share a specific history and experience which are formative for black identities. Hooks’s suggestion of encompassing this dual nature of black experience within postmodern critical discourse is “to critique essentialism while emphasizing ‘the authority of experience’.”³⁶⁶ The validation of the authority of experience refers to certain tensions between black feminist criticism and poststructuralist theory which Deborah McDowell pointedly summarizes: “While black feminist criticism [is] asserting the significance of black women’s experience, postructuralism [is] dismantling the authority of experience.”³⁶⁷ The strategy of conceding an authoritative status to black experience seems to be directly related, or, more precisely, diametrically opposed to Scott’s argument. However, even though their critical intentions are not the same, Scott’s and Hooks’s terms and methods are less antithetical than they appear. Hooks’s proposal to question black experiences beyond similarity and unity so that they reveal both the individual and the collective shows a remarkable similarity to Scott’s discussion. Thus Hooks is not content with

³⁶³ Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”, 515.

³⁶⁴ Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”, 516.

³⁶⁵ Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”, 514.

³⁶⁶ Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”, 516.

³⁶⁷ Deborah McDowell. “Transferences”. *The Changing Same. Studies in Fiction by Black Women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 169.

acknowledging the vantage point of black experiences, and calls for analyzing the peculiarities of black experiences which concur at various axes of power and privilege. Like Scott, Hooks emphasizes that it cannot be assumed that minorities share the same oppression, that their experiences are not essentially similar and do not reveal the authentic truth. The sameness of black experience is deceptive unless the experience of being black is understood in its conjuncture with other experiences of difference.

As I read it, there are several salient fields around which the black feminist discussion of “experience” is assembled. Firstly, black feminist critics are concerned with the formation of identity and subjectivity and with the important role “experience” plays in this process. Secondly, gender alone cannot account for black women’s experiences. Thus analyses focus on how the experience of gender and its representations are mediated by race, class and sexuality. Feminist critics today stress that “race, class and gender stratification affects the experiences of all, not just those of those who are most victimized.”³⁶⁸ But especially the study of the multiple locations of women allows a better understanding of women and offers insights into the complex and contradictory connections which inform all women’s experiences. Thirdly, through their multiple experiences and subjectivity, black women are able to enter into various discourses and occupy a positioning which is characterized by flexibility and fluidity. Although black women’s experiences and perspectives do not yield objective truths, the examination of their specific locations uncovers an understanding of self (and others) which challenges static constructions of social hierarchies, dominance and hegemony.

³⁶⁸ Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill. “Difference and Domination”. *Women of Color in US Society*. Eds. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 5.

6. Alternative Ways of Understanding Postwar Society

This chapter which revolves around the writings of women of color is meant to fulfill two aims. Firstly it wants to refute the much cherished notion that the postwar era was a time of literary inactivity for women of color and that they - unlike their male counterparts - started their activities only in the wake of the civil rights movement and the women's movement of the 1960s. In order to do so I will investigate diverse forgotten or overlooked texts to add to those few works which have persisted and gained entry into North American literary history to date. Recovering these narratives is a significant project, particularly when such work has little or no precedent. The second part of this chapter offers a more detailed reading of a selection of narrative texts which were written between 1945 and 1959 in order to learn about women's interior lives, their relationships, activities and self-perceptions.

Particularly the second part aims at bridging the wide chasm between the academic discourse and minority women's conditions of existence by attending closely to the voices of minority women. Strategically it is key to realize that their particular position in postwar society endowed women writers of color with experiences which prevented a genuine identification with those images that resulted from the discourse. In which ways then were these abstract conceptions relevant for women of color? Did their works reflect a discourse which did not reflect them and if so in which ways? How did they inscribe themselves into the discourse which was so alien to their own lives? Relying on the thematic cornerstones of the scientific discourse - relationships between the sexes, female identities, work and education, and history - women writers of color invoked experiences specific to their communities to give meaning to the discrepancies between the web of relations and the network of discursive practices in which they were entangled. I want to argue that those experiences became the connective tissue between material and discursive reality and that writers employed their experiences to come to grips with the highly problematic assertions of universal womanhood.

According to my discussion in the preceding chapter of how to theorize the category of experience, my reading of the texts is structured by two concerns. To begin with, particularly in view of the critical silence surrounding women of color in the post war years, I want to explore the ways in which women writers of color entered into the dominant ideology. To do so I deem it mandatory to listen to the

experience which is spoken and the second exigency is to make visible and analyze the circumstances surrounding speaking. Instead of simply taking the experiences of women of color in the 1940s and 1950s for granted, my intention is to determine which kind of experiences they mobilized and introduced into their writing at that time. Rather than using the experiences of women of color as the starting point of explanation and according their experiences a foundational and explanatory status, this determination is supplemented by an exploration of the parameters within which their experiences were produced and lived. Part of this task involves research into the formation of subjectivities in the context of multiple systems of subordination. While interrogating the themes around and through which writers constructed the specificity of women of color against the background of theoretical conceptions of womanhood, this chapter seeks to uncover the ways in which writers fit themselves into mainstream culture and society and, in consequence, how they dealt with the terms that defined them.³⁶⁹

6.1. Occupying the “Spaces of Silence”: The Literary Production of Minority Women Writers

While literary criticism has in cursory ways picked up the texts of some authors who wrote in the postwar era such as the African American writers Ann Petry or Gwendolyn Brooks, literary histories hardly ever mention, let alone integrate conceptually, other women writers of color in the fifteen years after World War II.³⁷⁰ In comparison, much more systematically researched and incorporated into the canon are the perspectives of their male colleagues like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright. This picture might lead to the notion that there was an actual creative void until the inception of the civil rights movement and the women’s liberation movement and that it was primarily the explosions of the 1960s and the 1970s which shook women authors of color out of their ostensible state of torpor.

³⁶⁹ Since the texts I discuss have been read by only a few modern readers and are rarely available, my investigation will out of necessity include detailed plot summaries. Naturally, these summaries cannot substitute for the texts themselves, and those convinced of the relevance of the writings of postwar women of color should study those books on their own.

³⁷⁰ Even progressive publications such as the recent German volume *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*. Ed. Hubert Zapf. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 1997, which explicitly attends to the multicultural character of American literature, presents a skeletal selection of material which suggests that mainly male authors expressed themselves in writing.

The marginal status of women of color in postwar society and the absence of a critically sustaining political, economic and social environment - as has already been illuminated in chapter 3 - appears to support the rarely questioned hypothesis of literary inactivity, an idea that has been making the rounds for a long time.

Detailed bibliographic research, however, does not corroborate this widespread belief. Instead it shows that such an interpretation of postwar cultural productivity is in fact based on either deliberate or unintentional erasure. One way or the other, literary critics have dealt with only a small fraction of what has been published by women of color between 1945 and 1960. This lack of notice is unfortunate because close attention reveals a rich complexity in these texts, which goes beyond the personal realities of women's actual lives and which shows that a generation of women writers of color did not simply assent to those ethics as formulated by academia. Before providing such in-depth readings, therefore, it seems apposite to look at some examples of "forgotten" texts by African American, Hispanic and Asian American women writers to demonstrate that women of color were full participants in postwar culture and society.³⁷¹ Rediscovering, reading and categorizing is a major undertaking which must overturn the basically ethno- and androcentric assumption of the negligible contribution of women of color to the literary body of works during the postwar years. This dismissal culminates in obscuring the complexity of postwar culture and the occurrence of notable transformations in postwar society.

The literary production of that era provides an important link that connected the changes in the modes of cultural articulation during the 1960s with shifts in earlier decades and foreshadowed the overt criticism of the civil rights movement and of the women's movement. Mediating among diverse interests, it also allows the questioning of the pervasive stereotype of postwar women as silent, apolitical and domestically passive, which largely originated with academic conceptions. Beside hinting at the continuities between the critical 1930s and the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, minority women's postwar creativity also represents a subject of serious study in its own right which helps win back a literary tradition that has been ignored and omitted.

³⁷¹ These examples are supplemented in the following chapters with further authors and information on their lives and their works. However, the list of the fairly large amount of publications is not meant to hide the fact that most books had only one printing with a small number of copies. Those copies which had not been sold after some time were pulped.

In literature, the pertinence of the debate on “woman’s place” was most evident in the frequent thematic recourse to the discursive repertoires available. There was a high degree of coincidence of themes around and through which these writers defined their specificity. Although the writings of women of color proved the persistence of these ideas in principle, they provided “dissident” perspectives by personalizing these topics and infusing them with highly subjective standpoints. For many women of color, the prevailing conceptions of womanhood first of all contained the implicit question of whether being a woman and belonging to a racial or ethnic minority were incompatible, mutually exclusive categories. Apart from this racialized perception of the gender discourse, the literary considerations did not remain within the confines of the academic definitions. The issues addressed by science were often treated as interconnected topics and other areas of concern were introduced and woven into the debate.

Several novels like *High Ground* by Odella Phelps Wood and *The Golden Coin* by Tai-yi Lin expanded the boundaries of the academic debate of the relationship between the sexes.³⁷² In different ways, each book expresses the complexity of the author’s vision, which implies that experiences of gender are not one-dimensional, but interlock with other problem-ridden issues like race and class.

Setting her novel in China in the 1930s, Lin describes a woman’s assumption of power within her marriage and within society through a magical golden coin. The novel traces the development of the poor, uneducated woman who climbs the social ladder by marrying an older university professor. She changes from a submissive, self-conscious wife into a rebellious and determined personality. Lin shows that the complexity of social reality can no longer be grasped through traditionally binary oppositions like man versus woman and culture versus nature. *The Golden Coin* weakens the widely accepted boundary between men and women by proposing that the criteria of social stratification alter and complicate both gender-specific qualities and roles. Thus, the connection between inherent gender characteristics and natural, stable roles appears particularly unconvincing with respect to its mono-causality.

Wood approached this topic with the stated intention “to portray the customs, loves, hopes and fears peculiar to the American Negro”³⁷³. In her only novel, she enters the male-female debate by contrasting the different perspectives of Jim

³⁷² Odella Phelps Wood. *High Ground*. New York: The Exposition Press, 1945; Tai-yi Lin. *The Golden Coin*. New York: John Day, 1946.

³⁷³ Wood, dedication, *High Ground*, n. p.

Clayton and his second wife Marthana and draws particular attention the entrapment of an ambitious black woman. Wood shows how aspiring black women are caught in socially prescribed roles, which are circumscribed by poverty and the lack of economic opportunities. In addition to the experiences of inequity resulting from class and race differences, *Higher Ground* reveals an awareness of gender barriers to individual effort: the burden of many, laborious births, the sexual division of labor which implies that Marthana gives up her job at first to raise her children, and the lack of employment possibilities for educated African American women. For Wood's heroine the war proves to be a change for the better. Being able to overcome race-, class- and gender-informed restrictions, the couple finally starts a new relationship, which is characterized by altered economic roles and a balanced distribution of power between the spouses.

The Mexican American writer Carmen Toscano shared with Wood the focus on a specific group which had not been represented in other depictions of the American experience. While she worked primarily with nineteenth-century biographic material in her *Rosario la de Acuña*, the following two books *Leyendas de México Colonial* and *La Llorona* concentrated on reworking traditional legends.³⁷⁴ Scanning the past from the perspective of female protagonists, Toscano felt that the life stories of Rosario la de Acuña and the legendary mourner illustrated very peculiar lessons on the idea of "woman".

Other books showed special concern with women's developing sense of independence, including *American Daughter* by Era Bell Thompson and *Citizen 13660* by the Japanese American artist Miné Okubo.³⁷⁵ Although Okubo's book primarily portrays the humiliations and degradations of camp imprisonment, she also contemplates the changes that followed the phase of internment. There were new opportunities for work and education and equal pay with men for working women. In *The Physicians*, Hazel Lin illuminated multi-layered power struggles within a Chinese (American) family, which were nourished by the heroine's decision to study Western medicine.³⁷⁶ Although the novel suggests that primarily financial pressures led women to the labor market, work is presented as an appropriate means of achieving autonomy and happiness. Work is the essential variable which ensures material and

³⁷⁴ Carmen Toscano. *Rosario la de Acuña*. Mexico: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1948; *Leyendas de México Colonial*. Mexico: Libro-Mexicano [cover 1955]; *La Llorona*. Mexico: Tezontle, 1959.

³⁷⁵ Era Bell Thompson. *American Daughter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946; Miné Okubo. *Citizen 13660*. 1946. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1983.

emotional independence and contributes to one's self-confidence. However it conflicts at the same time with the major tenets of the traditional sexual order.

Confident that personal histories can serve posterity as a guide and that their own experiences are able to be generalized, many African American, Hispanic and Asian American women of the postwar era chose to write down the stories of their own life. This appeal to utility was expressed by Marian Anderson in *My Lord, What a Morning*; Leila Mae Barlow in *Across the Years*; Helen Caldwell Day in *Color, Ebony*; Syble Ethel Byrd Everett in *Adventures With Life*; Cleofas Jaramillo in *Romance of a Little Village Girl*; Margaret Yang Briggs in *Daughter of the Khans*; and Su-ling Wong in *Daughter of Confucius*.³⁷⁷ As a response to social displacement and historical distortions, various writers of color revisited the past, either evoking an idyllic cultural domain or voicing the sometimes unspeakable horrors of racial and sexual repression. One group of writers such as the Mexican American Aurora Lucero White-Lea and the African American poet Pauli Murray, tended to narrate their genre-crossing versions of personal life history in nostalgic, romanticizing terms. Other authors like the Mexican American writer Beatrice Winston Griffith in *American Me* and the African American writer Estella Vaught in *Vengeance Is Mine* were intent on documenting in detail a harsh and grim past that was marred by poverty and prejudice.³⁷⁸

Beside those themes that were also intensely developed by scholars, the writings of women of color covered other areas which were hardly relevant within the white-dominated debate. Particularly in the context of the previously mentioned theme of women's and men's roles in social history, there was an intracultural concern, which was motivated by a sense of ethnographic responsibility to one's community. This concern was present in the focus on the everyday lives of those cultural subgroups which did not identify with white mainstream culture. Just as Wood's novel *Higher Ground* evidently originated from such an impulse, the writer, activist and mother

³⁷⁶ Hazel Lin. *The Physicians*. New York: Day, 1951.

³⁷⁷ Marian Anderson. *My Lord, What a Morning*. New York: Viking, 1956; Leila Mae Barlow. *Across the Years*. Montgomery: Paragon, 1959 Helen Caldwell Day in *Color, Ebony*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951; Syble Ethel Byrd Everett in *Adventures With Life: An Autobiography of a Distinguished Negro Citizen*. Boston: Mendor Publishing, 1945; Cleofas Jaramillo in *Romance of a Little Village Girl*; San Antonio: Naylor, 1955; Margaret Yang Briggs in *Daughter of the Khans*. New York: Norton, 1955 or Su-ling Wong in *Daughter of Confucius*. New York: Farrar Strauss, 1952.

³⁷⁸ Aurora Lea (Lucero-White). *Literary Folklore of the Spanish Southwest*. San Antonio: Naylor, 1953; Pauli Murray. *Proud Shoes; the Story of an American Family*. New York: Harper, 1956. See also Cleofas Jaramillo. *Romance of a Little Village Girl*. . Beatrice Winston Griffith. *American Me*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948; Estella Vaught. *Vengeance Is Mine*. New York: Comet, 1959.

Ruby Berkley Goodwin felt compelled to delineate the commonplace patterns of an African American family and community life in a friendly small town in the Midwest. Like Goodwin's autobiographical book *It's Good to Be Black*, Florens Hough's *Black Paradise* was meant to convince its readers of the quality of black life.³⁷⁹ Particularly Goodwin argued for more than racial pride: she pled for equal opportunities and for the peaceful coexistence of the various ethnic groups in US society. The racial and cultural self-reflection in Wood's, Goodwin's and Hough's narratives was complicated by the awareness of the different positions of women and men in the community and society in general.

This culturally self-reflexive gaze overlapped with an intense interest in the differences and similarities between diverse cultures. In the texts of African American writers, this was manifest in an unbroken fascination with the topic of passing, for example in Fay Liddle Coolidge's *Black Is White* and Reba Lee's *I Passed for White*³⁸⁰. Effie Kay Adams's *Experiences as a Fulbright Teacher*, which described the African American teacher's experiences in Pakistan, and Ida Jiggett's *Israel to Me: A Negro Social Worker Inside Israel* were not confined to the differences between white and black in American society, but presented reflections on race issues in a more international context.³⁸¹ Similarly, Era Bell Thompson's *Land of My Fathers*, Charlotte Croghan Wright's *Beneath the Southern Cross* and Eslanda Robeson's *African Journey* reported the writers' impressions and experiences of their visits to Africa.³⁸² Visible behind these books is the attempt to discover one's own roots and appropriate one's own history. At the same time these books refute the image of the African continent as a history- and cultureless continent, a topic that became most prominent in African American literature at the beginning of the 1970s.

The Chinese American writers Yutang Lin and Shelley Ota and the Japanese American writer Margaret Harada focused in their novels on how immigrants

³⁷⁹ Ruby Berkley Goodwin. *It's Good to Be Black*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1954; Florens Hough. *Black Paradise*. Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1953.

³⁸⁰ Fay Liddle Coolidge. *Black Is White*. New York: Vantage Press, 1958; Reba Lee. *I Passed for White*. As told to, and foreword by, Mary Hastings Bradley. New York: Longmans, 1955.

³⁸¹ Effie Kay Adams. *Experiences of a Fulbright Teacher*. Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1956; Ida Jiggett. *Israel to Me: A Negro Social Worker Inside Israel*. New York: Bloch Publishing, 1957.

³⁸² Era Bell Thompson. *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1954; Charlotte Croghan Wright. *Beneath the Southern Cross: The Story of an American Bishop's Wife in South Africa*. New York: Exposition Press, 1955; Eslanda Cardoza Goode Robeson. *African Journey*. New York: John Day, 1945.

experienced the clash of cultures and values.³⁸³ In contrast, other authors like Chiyono Sugimoto Kiyooka and Mai-mai Sze expressly saw themselves as travelers between two unnecessarily separate worlds. Their autobiographies *But the Ships Are Sailing - Sailing -* and *Echo of a Cry* were explicitly meant to foster understanding between Japanese, Chinese and American cultures by demonstrating the parallels in values and even life styles.³⁸⁴ Examining the supposed banalities that made up the life of many postwar women, the life of individual women was depicted as being generally matrixed within community life and larger social structures. These authors chose to focus on everyday patterns of their own lives and to generalize their experiences as women to fulfill this purpose.

This bibliographical evidence is given to argue the obvious point that there were women writers of color in the postwar years. They wrote books which were not only needed by them in order to claim a voice and to reclaim a central place in the past, but which were also needed to interrogate normative history. Seeing the postwar period as a time of notable change, it seems most helpful to read for “the literary” to direct attention to voices which are able to attest to dimensions which have gone unnoticed in conventional histories so far. The next chapters will provide a detailed analysis of how and in what ways postwar women of color assigned new meaning to events, facts and discourses, how and in what ways the historical world was inscribed in their texts and how and in what ways their stories nurtured subthemes that confronted contemporary issues and arguments.

If grouped together according to ethnic origins, African American women writers appeared, speaking absolutely, to be more productive than Hispanic and Asian American women.³⁸⁵ However, the numerical preponderance of African American

³⁸³ Yutang Lin. *Chinatown Family*. New York: John Day, 1957; Shelley Ayame Nishimurs Ota. *Upon Their Shoulders*. New York. Exposition Press, 1951; Margaret Harada. *The Sun Shines on the Immigrant*. New York: Vantage, 1960.

³⁸⁴ Chiyono Sugimoto Kiyooka. *But the Ships Are Sailing - Sailing -*. [Tokyo:] The Hokuseido Press, 1960; Mai-mai Sze. *Echo of a Cry. A Story Which Began in China*. New York: Harcourt, 1955. Yoko Matsuoka's book further buttressed this view of the similarities of different civilizations. See *Daughter of the Pacific*. Hew York: Harper, 1952.

³⁸⁵ African American women belonged to the largest minority group in the US in the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore it is hardly surprising, that from those works of the 1940s and 1950s which are known today and which have in some cases even been integrated into the canon, the majority were published by African Americans. Among them was the versatile author Ann Petry, who published *The Street* in 1946, *Country Place* in 1947, and *The Narrows* in 1953. Like Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote books for children and young adults, but only one novel during the postwar era, *Maud Martha*, published in 1953. The postwar readership also witnessed the end of Zora Neale Hurston's career which had already reached its peak in the late 1930s. Her *Seraph on the Suwanee* was the only one of her four final novels to be accepted for publication by any publishing house. In contrast to Hurston, Paule Marshall started her writing career in the postwar era and published her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* at

women on the book market does not automatically allow the conclusion that other women of color wrote less. Of general importance in the context of literary visibility is the distinction between writing and publishing. Here the Hispanic teacher, White-Cross-activist, editorialist and writer Leonor Villegas de Magnón is an instructive case in point. Raised in US Ursuline convents and later living in the Texas-Mexico border area, Villegas de Magnón decided around 1950 to put an English version of her semi-autobiographical narrative on the US book market. She translated and expanded the original Spanish manuscript to offer it to many publishing houses like Simon and Schuster and the University of Texas Press. They rather arrogantly dismissed it as unmarketable and declined on the grounds of its limited appeal and unsuitability for the postwar literary market. After Villegas de Magnón's death in 1955, her daughter proceeded to offer the 483-page manuscript to United States publishers, only to receive further rejections. Only after her daughter's death was the value of Villegas de Magnón's memoirs finally recognized. Those fragments that the various publishers returned to Leonor Villegas de Magnón and her daughter Leonor Grubbs were eventually pieced together and published in 1994 under the title *The Rebel*.³⁸⁶ Today, Villegas de Magnón's text can be seen as one of the most important "gendered" accounts. It attempts to grasp the historic significance and essence of the 1910 Mexican revolution by recording women's own social contributions. It is a crucial document which consciously challenges predominant stereotypes of Mexican Americans.

Villegas de Magnón's case shows very clearly that in the context of postwar culture, forces of social consumption and the reception of literature were of enormous consequence for a successful publication. A manuscript did not reach its intended readership until a publisher consented to bring it into book form. Authors of color were able to get published, so long as their writings did not decry existing social structures and demand radical reform. For literary historians, a first step toward understanding the absence of women writers of color from the "literary-industrial complex"³⁸⁷ is to acknowledge that postwar women of color had a particular

the end of the 1950s. See Gwendolyn Brooks. *Maud Martha*. New York: Harper, 1953; Zora Neale Hurston. *Seraph on the Suwanee*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1948; Paule Marshall. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. New York: Random House, 1959. In addition to these prolific writers, there was a large group of authors who had only one book published. Among them were diverse autobiographies, for example by celebrities like the blues singer Billy Holiday, actress Lena Horne, opera performer Marian Anderson and tennis champion Althea Gibson.

³⁸⁶ Leonor Villegas de Magnón. *The Rebel*. Ed. Clara Lomas. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994.

³⁸⁷ See Richard Kostelanatz. *Literary Politics in America*. Mission: Sheed, Andrews and McNeel, 1978.

relationship with the publishing establishment and that there were reasons for this relationship. The surviving correspondence between Villegas de Magnón and the various publishers allows the illuminating reconstruction of certain aesthetic and social attitudes. These attitudes denigrated Villegas de Magnón's writing and prevented its publication for about 40 years. Her failure to find a public for her story during her lifetime refers to literary and cultural conventions which measured the autobiographical genre according to such masculinist criteria as independence and individuality.³⁸⁸ *The Rebel* did not fulfill the criteria for qualifying either as a literary gem or as a profitable bestseller. The potential editors and publishers who formed the first generation of readers exerted their power to bar the book from obtaining literary merits or a broad audience. Villegas de Magnón's narrative was thus rendered unmarketable by US publishing houses for nearly four decades until the scholar Clara Lomas retrieved her works from oblivion.

What are the strategies and actions that will determine the presence and status of the writings by postwar women of color in the future? My point here is to call attention to the primary responsibility literary historians bear and because there are still numerous historical lacunae waiting to be filled by them. This concrete example demonstrates that interested literary historians should not simply be content with what appears to be a tradition of silence. Even though postwar women of color are surrounded by silence, this does not mean that they were as mute as the taciturnity of previous literary surveys suggests. Further archeological projects which lead to the recovery and preservation of the writings of women of color are badly needed.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ For an excellent exploration of the book's publishing history, see Clara Lomas's "Introduction" to *The Rebel*. In general, the evaluation and assessment of a text through publishers and editors is deeply imbued with the problem of literary value, ranking and last but not least the shaping of canon. A growing body of writings on canon formation in American Studies now exists. Among the work that vehemently criticized and constructively dealt with the narrow criteria for canonization is that of the literary scholar Hartmut Lutz. Particularly his challenging inaugural lecture addressed these points directly and precisely. "Nicht mehr nur tote weiße Männer! Zur Kanon-Diskussion in den anglophonen Literaturen der USA und Kanadas". Inaugural Lecture. Greifswald, 6 December 1995. For a long time, an elitist understanding of what constitutes literature has dominated both science and the market. In general, the very term "literature" presupposes the privileging of certain genres over other. Thus, the definition of "literature" is tied to power: the power to define literary form and value. An uncritical preoccupation with the aesthetic value of literature has often had disastrous results for ethnic and women's writings. In this way, the acceptance of "literary standards" which have been invoked precisely to marginalize a "flawed" text has regularly resulted in its banishment from view and from print.

³⁸⁹ If a substantial number of women of color did write after all, how can the under-representation of women of color authors in American literary history and criticism be accounted for? One of the reasons why such retrieval enterprises have been avoided for a long time is that they generally create existential problems for literary histories. Accounts of women of color in postwar society complicate that particular chapter in American literary history. They urgently display the necessity of thinking about and conceptualizing the dilemma of models of literary development. These models are meant to be representative, while in fact they are almost always provisional and incomplete.

However, when these archeological pursuits lead to very few or no signs of writing, as appears to be the case with Native American women in the postwar period,³⁹⁰ the most obvious task which still awaits today's literary historians and critics is the methodical explication and interpretation of such a quantitatively minimal production of literature. This explanation has to be searched for primarily within the restrictions inherent in the conditions in which women's creative work was produced.³⁹¹ The writers' access to the means of literary production was in large part influenced by a politically unstable and vulnerable position, poverty and insufficient or lower levels of education. A small portion of these material conditions, which as a rule influenced an author's specific perception of society, has already been sketched out. Still many questions remain to be asked and there is more crucial work to be done in relation to those socioeconomic constraints which have been beyond the scope of this investigation. The constraints include other overwhelming odds women writers of color faced in their endeavors to express themselves in writing such as a lack of access both to artistic training and interested, benevolent publishers which also affected the production and particularly the distribution of their works. The problem of censorship and marketing certainly deserves particular attention, not only with respect to the way marketing forces and literary norms hinder cultural production, but also to the strategies writers have used to cope with these variables. Much needs to be done to make the texts of postwar women of color a viable field of study and inquiry. A start would include thematic studies connecting the works of various woman writers of color and the development of critical theories and interdisciplinary research that links literature, history and the social sciences in order to illumine the production, distribution and consumption of these, literary or otherwise, writings.

³⁹⁰ Among the few examples I have found are Alice Marriott's *The Black Stone Knife*. New York: Crowell, 1957; *Maria, the Potter of San Ildefonso*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948; *The Ten Grandmothers*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1945; and Ellen H. Pollard's *My Family Torn Asunder: A Woman's Intimate Chronicle*. New York: Exposition, 1958. Pollard was the daughter of a Cree father and a white mother and was raised by her Indian grandmother. Her book decried a history of poverty and discrimination which often made finding psychological and material fulfillment an almost chimerical idea for a Native American woman.

6.2. The Investigation of Asymmetrical Power Relations

While the Mexican American writer Josephina Niggli and her novels, plays and short stories have only very rarely been taken account of and still less explored in depth, the Chinese American author Diana Chang is one of a few minority women writers in the postwar years whose work has not gone entirely unnoticed. Her work received some sporadic, though regular, critical recognition since the publication of her first book in 1956.³⁹² However, it is noteworthy that neither author has been regarded as representing particularly American experiences. This phenomenon can partly be explained with both authors' tendency to disregard and transgress existing national frontiers and, at a time when authors were expected to dedicate themselves to national interests, settle their novels *Step Down*, *Elder Brother* and *The Frontiers of Love* not in the United States, but in such "disreputable" countries as Mexico and China.³⁹³

The transnational perspective that both authors developed is less surprising within a biographical context. In fact, the personal history of both well traveled authors has repeatedly served as a point of departure for the critical interpretation of their works.³⁹⁴ Diana Chang was born in New York City of a Chinese father and an Irish-Chinese mother, spent her childhood in Beijing and Shanghai and returned to the United States for high school and college. She currently lives in New York. Josephina Niggli was born in 1910 in Monterrey to a Swiss father and a mother from Virginia, received her formal schooling in Texas and spent many years teaching in England and the US. From 1931, when she started her graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to her death in 1983, she lived in North Carolina.³⁹⁵

³⁹¹ This way of approaching literature has been developed by Terry Eagleton in his *Criticism and Ideology*. London: Verso, 1976.

³⁹² *The Frontiers of Love* was published in 1956 to some acclaim and even republished in 1990 by the University of Washington Press. An example of the early critical recognition is Kenneth Rexroth's Review of *The Frontiers of Love*. *Nation*. 29 Sept. 1956. 271-273. In the early 1970s, some of Chang's writings were included in anthologies of Asian American literature. See Dexter Fisher's *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.

³⁹³ Josephina Niggli. *Step Down, Elder Brother*. New York: Rinehart, Toronto, 1947 and Diana Chang. *The Frontiers of Love*. 1956. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1994.

³⁹⁴ Especially Chang's novel has been noted for its autobiographical character. See Amy Ling. *Between Worlds. Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1990. 113. See also Shirley Geok-lin Lim. "The Tradition of Chinese American Women's Life Stories: Thematics of Race and Gender in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*". *American Women's Autobiography. Fea(s)ts of Memory*. Ed. Margo Culley. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992. 256.

³⁹⁵ See Felicia Hardison Londré. "Josephina Niggli". *American Women Writers. A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*. Vol. 3. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981. 265-267. 4 vols.

Set in the late 1940s in the Westernized milieu of Monterrey and Shanghai respectively, both novels subtly refer to colonialism and its aftermath. Both novels avoid delineating a pre-colonial idyll, but represent a historical and political identity which is characterized by transience and suggestibility. They reveal the sensibility of two rigidly hierarchical societies undergoing a period of change. The social dissolution is directly knotted with America and its belief systems, which figure in the texts either as the ubiquitous and omnipotent neighbor or as non-adapted exiles. In different ways, these two texts explore the psychological, emotional and sociopolitical confusion instigated in their minor and major characters by the collapse of those social categories that have hitherto underpinned social values as well as political structures. Far from strengthening national, racial, gender and class fixities, these texts set out to question formerly stable roles and to confront the disruptions of predominant views of reality.

6.2.1. Josephina Niggli's *Step Down, Elder Brother* (1947)

Step Down, Elder Brother opens on a cold February day in 1947 and chronologically follows the steps of the 35-year-old protagonist Domingo Vázquez de Anda y Fausto within the next two months which completely change his and his family's life. In a very slow process of reorientation, Domingo learns how erroneous his views of the women in his life were. This lesson transforms Domingo's perceptions and his behavior. By having a male protagonist as central character, Niggli not only focuses on the effects of gender roles on women, men and on their relationships, but also clarifies in which ways both sexes can benefit from the extension or even dissolution of socially prescribed gender roles.

The first chapter introduces Domingo as a slightly uprooted young man who looks back on ten years of "mere dull routine"³⁹⁶ since his return from New York ended his affair with a North American girl. His interest in life is awakened by the encounter with the mysterious photographer Bárcenas and his exotic daughter. As Domingo attempts to learn the secrets that surround father and daughter, he makes a journey into worlds unknown to him: into the history of Mexico, into the lower classes of his country, into the minds and feelings of other people. After Domingo has finally

³⁹⁶ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 13.

discovered that Bárcenas is not a victim of the Mexican revolution, but a doctor for the military junta who is believed to have killed many people with the orders of the Huerta regime, his fascination and love dissipate. But instead of returning to his former boring life, Domingo - enriched by his diverse experiences - decides to begin a new life as the parent of his brother's illegitimate newborn son.

The novel does not simply delineate the development of Domingo's love affair, but contains various subplots. By tracing Domingo's obsession with Margara and focussing simultaneously on the relationships of his sisters and brothers, *Step Down, Elder Brother* constructs new paradigms of male-female relationships. At the same time these relationships are interwoven with the issues of patriarchal dominance, class differentiation and intergenerational fissures.

The life of the Vazquez de Anda family is almost completely dominated by the whims and wishes of the successful, but childless, Uncle Agapito. He rules tyrannically over the lives of his kin: he has bought a drugstore for his brother Lucio who wanted to be a university professor, he prevented his brother Rafael from becoming a musician and forced a real estate office upon him, he urged Domingo to enter his father's office instead of studying medicine, he intends to keep Domingo's brother Cardito from becoming a lawyer and he undermines all efforts to educate Domingo's sisters Sofıa and Brunhilda. Agapito's interventions into the life of his family lead Domingo to develop an overprotective posture toward his younger brother in order to safeguard him against the moves of their uncle. At the same time as Cardito falls ill with pneumonia, Domingo discovers that his brother has impregnated the young maid Serafina. Believing that Cardito is in love with the maid, Domingo transfers his protection to the maid and begins to grow almost "maternal" feelings for the child. He takes Serafina under his wings, finds her a new home and beats up her violent, blackmailing father. When Domingo realizes that Cardito does not intend to assume any responsibility for the mother or the child, the "elder brother" realizes that his own overinvolvement has alarmingly corrupted his younger brother's morals. After Serafina dies in childbirth, Domingo decides to care for the orphan child.

For a long time, Domingo's cautious commitment to Serafina leads observers to believe that he is the father of the unborn child. In the beginning Domingo does not counter this hearsay in order not to endanger his own or Cardito's love as he fears Agapito's interference. Despite this rumor, the daughter of his parents' friends, Veronica, is in love with Domingo and wants to marry him. Since Domingo rejects her

proposal, she tries to trap him into an engagement. The young man supposes that his parents advocate a marriage to Verónica and he does not want to disappoint his parents at first. Therefore Domingo hesitates to tell them the truth, but finally he summons up the courage for an official declaration that he will not marry Verónica so that he is spared the fate of a compulsory marriage.

Being so absorbed in his own and his brother's love affairs, Domingo realizes very late that his independent sister Sofía, who seems very much taken up with their new chauffeur Mateo Chapa, maneuvers Mateo into their real estate business. Assisted by her mother and her Aunt Tecla, the wife of Uncle Agapito, Sofía marries Mateo in secrecy. Because of his extraordinary business sense, Mateo shortly finds acceptance with the Vázquez de Andas.

In contradistinction to Sofía, Domingo's sister Brunhilda is nearly completely under the spell of Uncle Agapito. Although she had been sent for two years to New York for a musical education, Brunhilda has devoted her time to fashion and culture. With Uncle Agapito's approval, she spent his and her father's money in learning "the ways of the world."³⁹⁷ Now, after her return, she wants to use her "education" to marry into money and power. After her and Agapito's plans to catch the rich, cosmopolitan Jorge Palafox fail, she disappointedly yields to the proposal of marriage by an old suitor, the ambitious, but insolvent and unattractive Tito Gómez.

Although it becomes clear that the novel is set in 1947, the text neither imparts the exact year directly nor presents the Monterreyan society in any particular historical context. This strategy makes sense both against a political and an authorial background. Firstly, apart from the international setting, *Step Down, Elder Brother* belongs to a body of literature which does not defy openly the postwar nationalist hysteria. Obviously not untouched by Cold War fear and intimidation, the author responds rather defensively and cautiously to political events. Secondly, deprived of a particular historical background, Niggli's novel is able to signify even more than postwar concerns. Thus, the events and relationships that are depicted in the novel appear somewhat timeless and, despite a unique social atmosphere, can also be comprehended apart from their historical specifics. Yet the novel's location in Monterrey is not trivial, since it associates the relationship between the sexes with male domination:

³⁹⁷ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 113.

Loving Monterrey . . . is like loving an evil woman. You know she is evil. She parades all her faults for you without shame. If you fail her, she will leave you without tears, but you can't resist her. You will crawl on your knees to win a smile from her, and you will endure any shame, any humiliation, if she will only love you. Monterrey is not for the poet, the artist, the dreamer. She belongs to the warrior, to the iron-fisted man. Monterrey is no city for the feeble and weak. . . . Keep strong and conquer her.³⁹⁸

This image, which invokes the cultural role of woman as the Other and man as the conquistador, reappears in the novel through Domingo's dichotomous view of women: angelic mothers on the one hand and cold, indifferent daughters on the other. Significantly, both only form a starting point for the text's consolidation of a wider spectrum of gender roles. In other words, the text does not stay within this polarity as it is perceived by the male protagonist, but outlines female individuals which represent an extended panorama of womanhood. More importantly, the text directly contests the validity of this construction. Domingo's relationship to his mistress Margara, who attracts Domingo as the incarnation of Otherness, fails because in the course of the novel, he realizes that this otherness resulted from the projection of his own, innermost wishes.

The mystery of her remained but it was simple human mystery. . . . Each soul in its private field had this same mystery, and Domingo realized again that he had built too much from little. He had taken the mask of a face, had charged it with the electricity of his own imagination until he produced no human woman but a burnished painting out of all proportion to the original.³⁹⁹

Finally, Domingo learns of Margara's past which she attempts to keep secret and which does not correspond with what Domingo has imagined. His love collapses like a house of cards: "I loved you once, Margara, my green and gold, my Xtabay, but there is always a Ulysses of common sense to drag the enchanted back from jungle magic. You and I, we've known our time of happiness."⁴⁰⁰ Domingo comes to understand the meaning of Margara's warning that he had "manufactured a new me in your imagination, and I'm not like that at all."⁴⁰¹ He recognizes that the exotic Margara is a construct of his imagination. With this insight into the fictional element in gender relationships, Domingo is able to break free of his ideological encapsulation and to begin a life beyond confining gender roles.

³⁹⁸ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 44.

³⁹⁹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 247.

⁴⁰⁰ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 373.

The novel ends with a reversal of roles and completes a development which originally started as an act of resistance to his oppressive uncle.⁴⁰² Domingo metamorphoses into the Other. In contrast to the indifferent Margara, Domingo develops strong maternal instincts when confronted with his brother's newborn, helpless child. This ardor results from a peculiar "child-orientation", which Domingo has cherished since he became aware of Agapito's insensibility to children. The infant completely occupies his mind and renders any further communication with Margara impossible. Furthermore Domingo willingly releases his hold of Margara. His final decision is against the woman and for the child because in his mind, the necessity of parental love assumes priority over the fiction of heterosexual love.

Domingo wants to provide care for the orphaned child; he slips into the role of the mother. With this inversion, *Step Down, Elder Brother* speaks to the postwar discussions on gender roles. In attributing the centerpiece of the female role, motherhood, to a man, Niggli challenges those theories of womanhood which tie social roles to biological functions. She uses dominant social cliches which constitute men's roles as different from and opposed to women's roles and discloses the changeable and elastic nature of gender roles.

The novel clarifies that traditional role patterns consist of male domination and female surrender to male power. Since matrimony is the only locus where the two sexes can meet legitimately and because it is regarded as the logical result of adulthood, the object of marrying forms the desires and movements of most individuals. Marriage is presented in the novel as the guardian of asymmetrical power relations. Consequently, the road to marriage for the male consists basically in conquering the female. Even though this conception has been an integral part of Domingo's socialization, it shapes his attitude towards Margara and other women in contradictory ways. On the one hand, obedience is not what he primarily values in

⁴⁰¹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 188.

⁴⁰² For example, Domingo cultivates an unusual economic generosity which not only angers his thrifty Uncle Agapito, but sets Domingo apart from other Monterreyan men. Domingo is an Other in other ways as well. With his romantic idealism, usually considered a "feminine" quality, he crosses the boundaries between male and female roles. Even though he vehemently reproaches Veronica for her wish to repeat the legend of the romantic, but tragic heroine Graciela Miranda, he sees a parallel between his own and Graciela's love affair. "For a moment terror swept through him. The feeling of an unalterable destiny which had touched him in his bedroom returned. Was the Miranda legend but a forewarning of what his own fate would be if he followed the exotic Margara? Would she be destroyed and he left to mourn her in the closed room of his memory? Once again reason warned him that any relationship with Margara would end in tragedy." Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 79f. His own romantic fantasies may be read as proof of his feminization, that he is overcoming the essentialist division between man and woman. Domingo's desire to become a doctor also displays noticeable maternal features when he claims that he had been born to stop pain.

Márgara. He is rather charmed by Márgara's nonconformity. In contrast to Verónica, she is, for instance, an unusually independent woman who does not correspond to the stereotype of the defeated, docile woman. Domingo compares: “[Verónica's] obedient voice. The voice of Sofía for Mateo, of Brunhilda for Tito. The voice that Márgara would not recognize. Is it the fierce unbroken spirit I love in her, he wondered?”⁴⁰³ On the other hand, Domingo inconspicuously attempts to inhibit Márgara's autonomy, to subdue her. He takes advantage of Márgara's terror of discovery and increasingly assumes the role of her protector. Here, Domingo certainly applies what he has learnt about male-female relationships, but there is another aspect to his understanding of gender roles.

Domingo classifies “all women into two types: the ones he might marry some day and the ones he would never think of marrying.”⁴⁰⁴ This division, which has been elaborated and used for decades by his family, signifies a usually inflexible assortment of values according to which a woman (or man) qualifies or disqualifies for marriage: similar nationality, class and race. During Domingo's first love affair to the New Yorker Doris, which was a rebellion against the dictates of family, he had been able to ignore this family principle. What intrigued him most with this relationship was exactly the difference between them. However the unspoken family tradition ultimately estranged him from Doris. When Domingo meets Márgara for the first time, he is immediately fascinated by her because even more than Doris, she does not fit into his world - neither by appearance nor by behavior:

Márgara belonged to a world he had never known. Her background, her thought processes were entirely strange to him. . . . What did he know of her, really? That the Indian blood was strong in her veins? That poverty had bathed her in its boiling stream, searing away true pride until only false pride remained? That much and no more.⁴⁰⁵

But in spite of, or possibly because of the omnipresent family rules, Domingo is captivated by race and class differences. Although he is not aware of it, his relationship to Márgara serves as a point of departure for the development of a more active, rebellious position in the patriarchal world that surrounds him.

Not only in terms of race and class, Márgara forms a stark contrast to the other women in Domingo's world. Moreover, the moment he meets Márgara, Domingo sees her as a sexualized body:

⁴⁰³ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 357.

⁴⁰⁴ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 66.

⁴⁰⁵ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 67.

Staring at her, he felt as though all of his senses were surrounding her, probing her, seeking to discover what she was really like. The carnation fragrance of her body, too faint for any other man to notice, was strong in his nostrils. His tongue tasted her sweet flesh, and his hands felt her velvet softness. His ears could hear the pulsing of her blood.⁴⁰⁶

Niggli makes clear that initially Margara represents a commodity to Domingo, his relationship to her “merely a sexual attraction, an experiment in chemistry.”⁴⁰⁷

Domingo's impression that Margara hides something behind a stony mask of apathy is intertwined with his view of Margara as the sexual and racial Other. Again and again, he contrasts Margara's naturalness with Veronica's, Brunhilda's and Sofıa's artificiality. He constructs the binary opposition of wild nature vis-a-vis civilized culture. Identifying her as the “definite Indian type” and as a member of the Xtabay, he imagines her as representing the jungle. This jungle, which metaphorizes Margara's sexuality and race, reduces her, the Other, to a sexual and racial object. Domingo's fancy of the jungle behind the mask gives the impetus to pursue her like one possessed. With the image of the jungle, he constructs Margara as the physical embodiment of nature, which he wants to dominate. His method of wanting to control her is a political act, reproducing the colonial struggle for territory and power.

At the end of the novel when Domingo turns into the Other and becomes conscious of his own inventions is when his drive to dominate evaporates: “His hand touched her hair, but there was no tingle of excitement. / He who cuts a lock of hair from the Xtabay, shall be her master . . . / but the desire for mastery was gone.”⁴⁰⁸ Domingo's decision not to marry Margara but to leave her is not an expression of his inability to overcome his uncle's prohibitions and laws. Instead it represents an effort to reject both the cultural constructions and instruments of patriarchy.

Although their relationship is entirely platonic, Serafina begins to attract Domingo in similar ways as Margara. Despite her beauty Domingo only becomes aware of her presence because of her infatuation with Cardito. Domingo's realization that Cardito will be the father of Serafina's child causes an uproar in his class consciousness. Having internalized patriarchal ideologies, he does not think about the exploitation inherent in the master-servant affair, but dreamily compares Cardito's affair to his own he had at seventeen. Nevertheless, he insists on Serafina's dismissal while also

⁴⁰⁶ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 54.

⁴⁰⁷ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 67.

⁴⁰⁸ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 373.

asserting that "what the Vazquez de Anda family really needed was new blood."⁴⁰⁹ Domingo steers a middle course by removing her and finding a safe place for her. His decision is initially guided by his belief of acting in the interest of Cardito, then by his wish to protect Serafina from her abusive father, and finally by the strange magnetism the servant exerts over Domingo. In other words, Domingo transforms from a master into a patron and at last into an worshiper of Serafina.

This eventual attachment is due to certain qualities of Serafina's. Like Margara, she belongs to the "interesting" lower class with which Domingo is not acquainted. Like Margara, she has Indian origins. These aspects set Domingo's fantasies in motion. The image that forms in his mind centers on her difference. "There was humble dignity in Serafina that Veronica lacked, a native grace that was at variance with Veronica's carefully fostered naturalness. It was like comparing a real rose with the perfection of a wax one, but the real rose had life, the real rose had perfume."⁴¹⁰ What distinguishes his relationship to Serafina from that to Margara is both his own insight into the distance between the real and the imaginary Serafina and the fact of Serafina's pregnancy. Musing over her ancestors, he stops short of racializing and sexualizing her like he did Margara because his fantasies end in an imaginary birth act:

. . . it all began in the sea, the restless, never silent sea. For a moment Domingo had a vision of a huge oval, that began in the sea, its two lines stretching far apart, then meeting again in the child that was visible only through its pressure against the curtain of Serafina's flesh. On impulse Domingo caught up her hand and kissed it. She seemed to sense that he meant nothing by it save the gesture of a man toward the Mother-Woman.⁴¹¹

Instead of pathologizing Serafina's out-of-wedlock pregnancy according to postwar definitions,⁴¹² Domingo experiences a feeling of rejuvenation. It is not only Serafina's pride but also his sense of responsibility for Serafina and the child which revives him. "[H]e was no longer the old vacillating Domingo, but a new man, with the weight of Serafina's future in his hands and beyond that the weight of an entity not yet fully

⁴⁰⁹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 34f.

⁴¹⁰ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 96.

⁴¹¹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 238.

⁴¹² On the history of single mother pregnancy, see Rickie Solinger. "Race and 'Value': Black and White Illegitimate Babies, 1945-1965". *Mothering. Ideology, Experience, and Agency*. Eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey. New York, London: Routledge, 1994. 287-310 and Kunzel, "White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States", 302-331.

formed but still in the process of forming, secret still as to male or female."⁴¹³ Grappling with the deficiencies of traditional role models, he is unmistakably captured by the idea of a human being which is sexless, untouched by sexual differences. Thus, his vehement rejection of planning the child's future implies a tolerance which allows one to make one's own decisions as to identity and gender role. His learning also enables him to question his own stereotypical thinking. Is Serafina really fragile and helpless? He realizes that he has been imposing on her a constructed identity and that she "is not of 'that class', of any class. She is a human being with a mind and heart of her own."⁴¹⁴ Domingo thus refutes an ideology of oppression which deprives people of any choice in their life because every important decision has been pre-structured by socially instituted and regulated constructs. Accordingly, his pivotal experience is that "[i]t was really a matter of choice, and the choosing was now."⁴¹⁵ What someone "is" depends not only on those values sustaining class and sex differences, but even more on a conscious process of decision-making.

Domingo frequently compares Serafina to Verónica. Through the figure of Verónica, Niggli introduces a personality whose determination to marry Domingo confers on her unique and unconventional qualities. Domingo has known Verónica since she was a small child and presumes that he knows her inside out. Domingo conveniently assumes the position of a benign advisor without having to think or care very much about Verónica and her emotions. Being fifteen years her senior and a man, Domingo is used to treating her according to the traditional view of the beautiful, but dependent, woman. His judgment of Verónica fits stereotyped gender patterns, which block the perception of women as personalities with individual qualities. Women are merely "soft, gentle creatures."⁴¹⁶ He claims that Verónica has only been taught to follow the artificial (man-constructed) canon of femininity, because she

had been taught to sit, to stand, to move with grace until the artificial had become part of her nature. . . . That was why good money was paid to the nuns of the Sacred Heart . . . so that society's young ladies could learn how to use their femininity to their best advantage. It was part of their

⁴¹³ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 162.

⁴¹⁴ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 286.

⁴¹⁵ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 318.

⁴¹⁶ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 83.

heritage, just as he himself was bound by the restrictions and regulations of his own inheritance.⁴¹⁷

But Verónica reveals more substance. Like Domingo, she accepts marriage as institution, but wants to marry the partner of her choice, the man she loves. As her femininity does not work upon Domingo, Verónica devises another scheme for reaching her goal of marriage. Instead of becoming a willing victim of patriarchal traditions, Verónica takes the initiative. She shows that she is strong, conscious and committed. Like Mágina, Verónica is different from the picture that Domingo has painted. Niggli partly disrupts the category of femininity by endowing Verónica with features which have not traditionally been associated with women and by portraying her as a subject who faces and solves her problems through manipulation and action. Domingo's first reaction is: "The girl was a spoilt brat, and she needed a strong lesson in manners."⁴¹⁸ The moment he understands the power Verónica has over his life, his condescending attitude evaporates. He changes his opinion of her and his attitude towards her when he realizes that she is not at all the woman he believed her to be. "From this moment she was his enemy, fighting with every weapon, honest or dishonest, to hold him prisoner. To his surprise, he found in himself a grudging respect for her."⁴¹⁹ It is her deviance from conventional notions of femininity that turns Verónica into a proper individual and serious opponent.

Niggli presents the world of Domingo as the male side of the relationship between the sexes and as the object of her criticism. Because of his socialization in a patriarchal society, Domingo's rejection of patriarchal role models is neither sudden nor wholly conscious, but he increasingly defies the established system of patriarchy. Finally he rejects the authority of the system and its values over his life.

The diverse heterosexual couples in *Step Down, Elder Brother* are further commentaries on the state of the relationship between the sexes. The novel exposes that at the root of a patriarchal society lies the division of work and spheres which relegate women to the home, complying with the decisions men make. Very subtly, Niggli questions through each couple the kinds of roles which conventionally associate men with active and women with passive behavior.

Domingo clashes with the patriarchal system and the Law of the Father, in Lacanian terms, which is represented in the novel mainly by his authoritarian uncle.

⁴¹⁷ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 85.

⁴¹⁸ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 91.

⁴¹⁹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 175.

Agapito is an unscrupulous man who uses his power to force the members of his family into certain roles. While men are destined for economic success, women are born for marriage and need no "excessive" education; therefore he does not employ women other than as stenographers in his bank. Agapito's marriage to Tecla seems to mirror this distribution of power. Tecla is commonly portrayed as a dumb object, which, deprived of her former independence, willingly complies with the authority of her husband. "She was a fool to marry him. She knew when she did it that he would keep her on a short rein."⁴²⁰ However, Tecla is not the perfect mother, homemaker and wife Agapito had probably expected her to be. Firstly, the couple does not have children, secondly, the organization of her household exceeds her capacities, and finally, Agapito has been unable to "inject the virus of thrift" into her. On the surface, Tecla is the paradigm of female submission and silence, but as it turns out, she secretly counteracts her husband's desires and plans. Therefore, she does not simply accept patriarchal impositions but challenges her husband's alleged superiority.

The arrangement of the Vázquez de Anda household is similarly deceptive: Domingo's father Don Rafael manages their real estate business and his mother Doña Otilia their home. Beneath this convention, a partial role reversal has taken place. Don Rafael proves to be a most unambitious man, whose only passions are his home and music, while Doña Otilia, who "ordinarily allowed the men . . . to dominate her world," has developed "an instinct for the truly important, and when those moments came she was rock strong, the true matriarch."⁴²¹ She is the one who is consulted for advice, whereas her husband demonstrates an emotional delicacy requiring more and more consideration and tact. Yet Doña Otilia sensitively encourages her children to live their own lives, even if it means disobeying accepted rules or her husband's and her brother-in-law's wishes. Doña Otilia is the only one who accepts without hesitation her daughter's goal to marry the family chauffeur because she is aware of the anachronism of many social conventions. However, that the rest of the family accepts Mateo as Sofía's husband is not only due to Otilia's approval, but to Mateo's drive.

With her mental strength, her aloofness and her business sense, Sofía traverses clear gender boundaries. Possessing none of the traditional feminine qualities, she is

⁴²⁰ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 38.

⁴²¹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 111.

believed to be the incarnate anti-thesis of matrimony and love. Her sister accuses her of showing masculine tendencies by claiming that the "world of finance is so completely your world. I can understand why you've never married. Your heart is shaped like a silver peso."⁴²² But Sofía proves to her family that less traditionally feminine behavior does not preclude attraction, love and marriage.

She shows Domingo that it is possible to marry a partner of one's own choice even against family conventions. In order to convince Mateo of her qualities, Sofía leaves the prescribed path of feminine virtue and throws herself one night at Mateo. He is at first repelled by Sofía's brazenness, but then takes his chance for social advancement.⁴²³ Outwardly, their relationship appears to correspond to received gender patterns: ". . . she was not to ask questions. She was a wife, now, the wife of a middle-class man, and for such there could be no questions."⁴²⁴ Her role entails obedience to the orders of her husband, but Domingo recognizes shrewdly that their mother is a definite role model for Sofía.

The resemblance between mother and daughter was very marked. In the Vázquez de Anda house it was doña [sic] Otilia who took command in the moments of crisis. It would be the same with Sofía. Mateo might think he gave the commands, but it would be Sofía's hands on the driving reins. . . . Mateo she would mold into any shape she wanted, and the shape she wanted was power.⁴²⁵

Sofía and Mateo, who are both in a socially disadvantageous situation, use their marriage to overcome a position of powerlessness, which is the product of economic stratification and gender-preconceptions.

Where Sofía and her mother act as conspirators against male hegemony, Domingo's brainless sister Brunhilda is both a supporter and victim of patriarchal structures. Being seduced by the money and world views of Uncle Agapito, she has merely concentrated on clothes and beauty instead of understanding and using the chance for education she was offered. She thus perpetuates her uncle's patriarchal values. She hopes to benefit from an alliance with Agapito, but all her dreams of

⁴²² Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 165.

⁴²³ Without knowing the real extent of Sofía's "misbehavior", Domingo notices her roaming that night and violently reproaches her for doing so, even though he is doing the same. His attitude displays the typical double standards of patriarchal societies. While it is common and acceptable for a man to have an affair, it is disastrous for the reputation of a woman. Sensing this hypocrisy, Sofía immediately puts her brother on the defensive: "You coming in here so moral to insult me, and you panting after your woman. . . ." Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 154.

⁴²⁴ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 315.

⁴²⁵ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 317.

finding a rich and influential husband are shattered. When she puts up with marrying the second-best man, Domingo comprehends her predicament.

For a brief moment he saw her, trapped like himself, in the box of her world. The gloss of her *yanqui* independence slid away from her even as the engagement ring slid on her finger. She was settling like a dove into the nest of Mexican domesticity, and . . . in ten years she would gasp in horror at the freedom of young moderns.⁴²⁶

Brunhilda, who requires the male for self-affirmation, continues to constitute her position as dependent on males. She cannot rid herself of the established system of hierarchical oppression by sex, class and nationality.

Step Down, Elder Brother exemplifies the search of individuals for whom the security of traditional patterns of behavior has ceased to exist. Transferring his own confusion, Domingo laments that it is "the new freedom. . . . It's come too fast. Our girls have no standards left to guide them, and no judgment to aid them."⁴²⁷ The text is set in a period of change and focuses on a particular class undergoing a crisis, not only to show that those confines which have been drawn to define gender identities have always been intrinsically unstable, but also to point out possible strategies for the future. Even though *Step Down, Elder Brother* seems to be a rather conventional novel, it is a very cunning rebellion against patriarchal oppression and the categories on which it is based, one that cannot be crushed as it is hardly apparent.

However, it is not only the meaning of gender roles which is undermined. While Niggli presents a social world in quest of new values, she queries interconnected categories of social organization and individual identity. She draws a picture of an anachronistic social class in a modern world where other structural principles like race and class have also begun to forfeit much of their power. The entire Vázquez de Anda family and the class it represents have organized their belief systems and values around the myth of racial superiority. In the past the category "Creole"⁴²⁸ justified the political dominance of a group, but the novel activates the argument of degeneration, thus making the overthrow of race categories more plausible. Moreover, as Domingo's brother Cardito acknowledges, only the rejection of hegemonial classes can secure the way into the future:

"The *mestizo* is the middle class. Without him there can be no democracy.
... In the rest of South America the creole still holds the whip in his hand.

⁴²⁶ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 303.

⁴²⁷ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 312.

⁴²⁸ The definition of "the creole" as a descendent of pure European origin discloses the widespread conflation of race with nationality.

Look at Perú. Lima is a creole city with processions to honor the arrival of the Spanish ambassadors, the Afternoon of Mantón to open the season's bullfight, and a snap of the fingers for the Indian starving in the mountains. Perú today is the México of eighteen forty. We are the only Latin American Republic which has evolved a middle class, and that middle class is the *mestizo*."⁴²⁹

While Cardito endorses this new idea only in theory, Domingo puts it into practice: he insists on recognizing Cardito's rejected child as a member of the family.

The novel envisions a new society which is not built on exclusive, sociopolitical conceptions. Instead this new society allows the development of complexly fragmented identities without creating new categories and hierarchies. Through the Vázquez de Andas, Niggli unravels race-, class- and gender hegemonies and confronts the underlying structure of difference.

6.2.2. Diana Chang: *The Frontiers of Love* (1947)

Diana Chang's novel *The Frontiers of Love*, which is set in Japanese-occupied Shanghai during the months before the Japanese army's surrender in 1945, covers a similarly short span of time like *Step Down, Elder Brother*. It illustrates the emotional situation of a well-off, cosmopolitan group of young people during a time of political insecurity. Told from varying points of view, the novel does not introduce what might be called one central character but provides multiple perspectives. However, within these different perspectives, the sensibilities of a twenty-year-old daughter of an American woman and a Chinese father are primarily dealt with. Experiencing an increasing need for stability in her life, Sylvia Chen suddenly falls in love with Feng, an English-Chinese lawyer, whose political single-mindedness begins to attract her. After an intense process of analyzing her own needs and the catalytic moment of her young cousin's death, the romance vanishes.

Feng on the other hand gets involved with her because as a member of the Communist Party he initially intends to use her as a source of information about the printing plant her father is managing. Feng's point of view represents the second focus of Chang's novel. For him, his biraciality, the possessiveness of his English mother, and the absence of his Chinese father serve as a source of constant identity

⁴²⁹ Niggli, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, 305.

conflict which he combats by incorporating the totalitarian claims of the Communists. Unexpectedly, he starts to develop deeper feelings for Sylvia, but when he becomes involved in the murder of her cousin Peiyuan, he follows the party's instructions to leave her, and to his own surprise, he does so without real regret.

At the same time, Sylvia's Chinese-Australian friend Mimi Lambert, who has entertained a love affair with the Swiss businessman Robert Bruno, discovers that she is pregnant. When she learns that Robert is not willing to marry her because his father objects to her mixed origins, she has a miscarriage. In the end, she prostitutes herself in order to find a man who can help her get out of China.

In addition to these three major voices, which document the protagonists' interior conflicts and their agonizing relationships, Sylvia's father and her cousin, the country bumpkin Peiyuan, also get the chance to articulate their feelings. These emotions are rooted more firmly in Chinese culture than those of the other three characters. *The Frontiers of Love* offers glimpses into the inner and outer realities of all these characters and of their psychosexual relationships as they develop in the daily encounter with friends, partners and spouses.

The image of the multicultural metropolis Shanghai exhibits the same features which characterize the three major protagonists and reflects the novel's theme of the uncertainty, incoherence and discontinuity of identity definitions. It is a "Eurasian" city containing coexisting as well as unresolvable opposites: "Chinese and Western, native and foreign, liberatory and oppressive, national and international."⁴³⁰ Therefore, it is experienced distinctly and has diverse meanings for different people. However, the freedom and the choices that Shanghai offers are also risky: "People were true to nothing in Shanghai: they belonged only to the surface values of both East and West. If one did not carefully hold on to one's sense of self, one might wake up one morning looking for one's own face, so easily lost."⁴³¹ Chang's novel demonstrates a way of finding a "face" without falling victim either to a neat array of pre-given, essentialized identities or to a care- and meaningless tolerance.

At the very beginning, Sylvia discloses the difficulties which her bicultural roots pose for her gender identity:

She waved and left, walking down the dark stairs in her newest dress, and rebelling inwardly against the sedateness the tight skirt required of her. That was the trouble with Chinese dresses; they expressed a kind of

⁴³⁰ Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Introduction. *The Frontiers of Love*. By Diana Chang. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1994. viii.

⁴³¹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 87.

aristocratic demureness. But foreign clothes didn't suit her entirely either. Their full skirts seemed to stand out from her, making her slighter than she was, orphaned in them. I shall have to design my own kind of clothes, a modified Chinese dress, she thought. I shall do that when the war is over.⁴³²

Caught between the gender images of two different worlds which are both variations of female powerlessness, she senses their inadequacy to express herself and deliberately resolves to create a new image one day. But in the meantime, she

wore Chinese and foreign clothes alternately, jockeying her dissatisfaction with herself in each. Tonight she had contrived to look classically Chinese, for she kept her hair shiningly clean and deliberately straight, cut at a provocative length, neither long nor short. It blew away from her face, making her seem almost boyish . . . But she could look no more Chinese than Mimi. Their eyes were brown; their hair, too, and turned reddish in the sunlight. And their exoticness lay in the truth that they seemed to have no racial identity at all.⁴³³

Neither in terms of gender, nor in terms of race, does Sylvia fit dominant definitions. This awareness of her own hybridity fills her with insecurity; she feels that she is "guilty of not knowing who she was."⁴³⁴

Initially, Sylvia and Feng date only rarely because both seem to rely on patterns of behavior the other one rather dislikes and neither correspond to each other's picture of the perfect man or woman. Although Sylvia does not like Feng Huang particularly, his demonstrative assurance increasingly begins to impress her and she consents to meeting him. Despite their mutual interest, their rendezvous is exhausting for both.

From the beginning, Feng's attitude toward Sylvia is highly inconsistent. On the one hand, he criticizes Sylvia, who "sat in passive receptiveness, awaiting his mood," for being spoilt and irresponsible. He gives her a lecture on his own ideal of a (Chinese) woman, which in fact deviates from a more conventional understanding of women's roles. His story depicts a very traditionally educated girl who defies social norms, studies at university and earns her own living. Feng's tale appears to assist women's rights. Yet Feng's own contradictions manifest themselves in the very story he is telling Sylvia. What distinguishes his heroine is not her social, but her political engagement. What is more, she is not able to become a political activist all by herself, but has to be introduced into the world of politics by her boyfriend: "She was

⁴³² Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 4.

⁴³³ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 12.

⁴³⁴ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 19.

not terribly aware politically, but her boy friend was, and she lost him. Suddenly she was catapulted into the nation's life. Suddenly she has given of herself, and taken life in return!"⁴³⁵ The inherent message in this story is that she is "the new heart of this nation" mainly because of her involvement in the male-dominated realm of politics. The tale thus largely represents a rhetorical camouflage of patriarchal thinking, which divides the world into sharply confined spheres and assigns its male and female inhabitants different values.

As a result, Feng is deeply irritated when he does not feel entirely in command of the conversation because Sylvia does not acknowledge, but undermines his authority. While Feng wants to assume the position of an omniscient teacher, Sylvia simply rejects assuming that of an eager student. He teaches a lesson, she refuses to understand; he asks a question, she refuses to answer it. Her behavior unveils how ideology-ridden Feng's story is and that Feng's fault lies in his undifferentiating dogmatism. She concludes that "I'm neither my father nor the Chinese girl you described. Neither are you."⁴³⁶ With this remark, she shatters Feng's claim to moral superiority and emphasizes that he is in no way entitled to castigate her, since they belong to the same passive, spoilt and irresponsible class.

The turning point in their relationship is when Feng, Sylvia and their friends are arrested by Japanese soldiers on suspicion of celebrating the news of the end of the war. The danger of the situation and their fear makes them forget their antagonism and brings them nearer to each other. Falling back on conventional behavior patterns, she admires him for his stamina, while he is moved by her anxiety. It dawns on both of them that the picture they originally had of each other might be different.

Sylvia's sudden passion for Feng is based on her wish that the determined, strong Feng might rescue her from her own ambivalence and insecurity. She does not know how to solve her identity problems, and, sensing the complexity of most individuals, she wonders: "Did they close off a part of themselves, close the drawer on the confusion inside and present an entity and a position from which to act?"⁴³⁷ Her conclusion is that a man can at least help to secure a clearer gender identity by stimulating her sexuality. Yet, she averts the first sexual contact with Feng because she is too much torn between her different conceptions of self.⁴³⁸ A few days later,

⁴³⁵ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 104.

⁴³⁶ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 105.

⁴³⁷ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 144.

⁴³⁸ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 127.

the love act takes place after a violent quarrel between Sylvia's racist mother and her family which forces Sylvia to announce "'I am Chinese'."⁴³⁹ This declaration terrifies her tremendously. Although she is led to believe that she has to settle on one of the multiple sides of her identity, she acknowledges the risks of such a decision. The social imposition of a narrowly circumscribed role operates like a reductionist formula:

She was so many people, and she could no longer maintain the balance among them all. They would have to become one soon, they would have to begin to act as one soon, and it was almost as though she was murdering parts of all the different people she was, all the parts she did not want to retain.⁴⁴⁰

Bewildered by this thought, Sylvia runs away and instinctively finds her way to Feng's apartment, begging him to help her. Indeed, the sensation of her own emerging sexuality provides a remedy for her confusion:

She felt she was one at last, she was herself - Sylvia - having traveled all the paths to a single here and now. She gazed in wonder at Feng's face, his singleness, his pure and masculine identity. He seemed entirely true and real, endowed with grace. He had given her back to herself but she wanted him to lead her life for her.⁴⁴¹

Sylvia's initial rebelliousness has subsided because she experiences sexuality as a medium of self-definition and self-affirmation. However she clearly centers her new-found "holistic" identity around her male lover, and even takes it to an extreme by renouncing her own identity. Chang points out that it is most difficult for Sylvia to separate issues of race and gender because she reinforces gender stereotypes in order to escape the cage of racial boundaries.

Her belief in his power over her ignites and inspires Sylvia's attachment for Feng, and she even begins to embrace his opinion of her: ". . . she thought of herself as overprotected, a hot-house plant, a daughter of safety and know-nothingism."⁴⁴² Her low opinion of her capacities, which results from this posture, informs the nature of her relationship to Feng. Sylvia voluntarily accepts the role of a devoted student who has to be re-educated and who needs Feng's reiterated praise and acknowledgment. As a consequence, "she felt only like a photographic plate which was less than

⁴³⁹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 141.

⁴⁴⁰ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 146.

⁴⁴¹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 148.

⁴⁴² Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 182.

nothing unless exposed to light. And Feng's love was her illumination."⁴⁴³ As critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim observes, Sylvia's identity rings hollow, that is it consists of a gap that significantly can only be closed by male subjectivity.⁴⁴⁴ By way of love, she has exchanged her disintegrated self for a passive, dependent existence. In Sylvia, Chang reveals how artificial race and gender boundaries intersect, how these create deep discomfort with the limits of social constructions, and how they monolithically cage a woman within these clear boundaries.

Sylvia's absorption in her own wants hinders her from seeing Feng's own anxieties behind his mask of masculine sureness. To her, he "*seemed* pure and strong and completely free from ambivalence."⁴⁴⁵ She avoids questioning Feng's domination of their relationship because it is this quality that she seeks. There are moments of perspicacity when even Sylvia feels that Feng is not the man she wants him to be. But she puts her critique of Feng down to her own inability to love: "Her still 'seeing' seemed to her to mean that she did not love well enough."⁴⁴⁶ It is only in the end when Sylvia realizes that the man she had loved was mainly a product of her own imagination.

Her will to believe in Feng serves his needs perfectly. He is a man who is almost neurotically preoccupied with power and therefore dreads every situation and person that is out of his control. His obsession originated in a troubled mother-son relationship, which made it difficult for him to become independent of his mother and to find his own identity. In a deliberate and painful effort to break away from "this smothering Western matriarch,"⁴⁴⁷ he discards those race and class values they once shared, turns to revolutionary Communism and eventually internalizes its patriarchal ideology.

While Sylvia uses love as a weapon against the fragmentation of her sense of herself, Feng, who struggles with similar identity conflicts, has found the completely different solution of political fanaticism. In connecting the convalescence of her self with a working relationship and love, Sylvia's position is much more vulnerable than Feng's. When their relationship is eventually crushed by her cousin's murder and Feng's involvement in his death becomes clear, Sylvia has to confront the question of her identity once again. This is in contrast to Feng, who of course suffers from the

⁴⁴³ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 183.

⁴⁴⁴ Lim, Introduction, xviii.

⁴⁴⁵ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 182, my emphasis.

⁴⁴⁶ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 212f.

loss of love as well, but whose ideological concern for China increasingly neutralizes the destructive force of this emotional loss.

Sylvia ends up realizing her primary mistake in their relationship: "Her passion seemed to have created what it needed for its own existence."⁴⁴⁸ She begins to acknowledge her motives for loving Feng and her blindness, which was the logical outcome of her longing for coherence and unity. The fragility of their relationship becomes evident because "[n]o one else could supply one's own center."⁴⁴⁹ Although she has founded her self completely on her image of Feng, she does not collapse. It is the very flexibility of her personality she has always complained about which allows her now to deal constructively with her own situation and to empathize with Feng, Peiyuan and all those people who mourn Peiyuan's death. Deprived of her idealistic frame of mind, she concludes that dependency is no solution. Instead, she chooses a path of salvation by

residing fully and carefully in her own, she would be able to engage her emotions, her mind and her days with pride. Abruptly, she no longer felt accidental, but responsible. She was Sylvia Chen, and she would speak out for herself - an entity composed of both her parents, but ready to act and not merely react, for one individual - herself. She had seemed to take her first breath of life.⁴⁵⁰

Here, Sylvia assumes the position of a speaking subject which does not hesitate to voice and underline what is the multiple heritage of her parents, the male and the female, the Chinese and the American, all merged into one human being. She takes charge of her self and no longer blames artificial identity limits for problems but accepts "the power of agency"⁴⁵¹.

In sharp contrast to Sylvia, for whom the failure of their relationship is finally counterbalanced with the sensation of a rebirth, Feng experiences a grievous lack of feeling: "it was like a kind of impotence, the facing of the blank wall of self."⁴⁵² Unlike Sylvia, Feng is not endowed with the ability to keep his identity in process; on the contrary, his development is overwhelmingly regressive. Through Feng, the novel *The Frontiers of Love* exemplifies the psychologically devastating consequences of a fixed identity formation.

⁴⁴⁷ Lim, Introduction, xv.

⁴⁴⁸ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 235.

⁴⁴⁹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 239.

⁴⁵⁰ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 237.

⁴⁵¹ Lim, Introduction, xix.

⁴⁵² Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 226.

For both Sylvia and Feng, it is difficult to establish a productive, balanced relationship, since both cannot look upon their parents as guides, not only because there is conflict between generations, but also because fundamental conflicts take place within marriage itself. Despite being married for at least twenty years, the worlds of Sylvia's parents are still separated by deep cultural gaps. Liyi had met Helen in the United States when he attended the University of Missouri, "driven then with the belief that everything which was extroverted and American was better than what was Chinese."⁴⁵³ Having initially been attracted by the difference the other one represented, both have undergone a certain process of disillusionment. Helen "would have liked to have been overpowered by some of those men, put in her place, dominated and reprimanded,"⁴⁵⁴ while Liyi regrets that "[t]here was no beauty, in the Chinese sense, in Helen's expression of joy and eagerness. . . . There was exuberance, extroversion, but no beauty."⁴⁵⁵ Although they still love each other, the marriage of Sylvia's shy father and her volatile mother is characterized by endless quarrels, which constantly require the daughter's mediation between the two. Neither Helen nor Liyi is able to live up to the other one's expectations. Their marriage represents the endeavor of coping with disappointment as well as attempting to shape the partner according to one's own needs.

Especially Helen's contradictions, that is her love for her own (Chinese) family and her simultaneous hatred of everything Chinese, put the marriage to a continual test. Helen's and Liyi's marriage does not break up because of their love, but also because of their chauvinist beliefs, which seem to provide their marriage with some stability. Disclosing different forms of cultural racism, both Helen and Liyi feel superior to the other and devalue the other one's culture as primitive. However, Liyi's convictions prove to be much less static than Helen's. After Peiyuan's death he realizes at last that to "be Chinese was not enough; it did not define one's beliefs any more. The times were demanding new loyalties, more discriminating, more humanitarian. His children, free from any narrow chauvinism, were the new citizens for an expanding century."⁴⁵⁶ Accordingly, his marriage to Helen assumes a new meaning: it was not only "the bravest thing he had done,"⁴⁵⁷ it also receives a new, political foundation. For him, marriage is no longer simply a personal vow of a man

⁴⁵³ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 161.

⁴⁵⁴ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 164.

⁴⁵⁵ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 157f.

⁴⁵⁶ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 245.

and a woman, but a dedication to tolerate difference and to relax overly narrow boundaries which have been created to define a person's identity.

While the relationship of Sylvia's parents contains a faint possibility of change, the marriage of Feng's parents has definitely failed. Feng believes his mother Audrey, despite her physical beauty, is incapable of "keep[ing] people."⁴⁵⁸ However disturbed the mother-son-relationship is, Feng is able to see the defects in his parents' marriage. Cut off from her country, Audrey is incapable of adapting to her Shanghai home and tries to recreate her own English world in China, in her "Englishwoman's house, dark as an Elizabethan tavern . . ."⁴⁵⁹ with her son, whom she keeps calling Farthington instead of Feng. Her sense of herself is exclusively fed by her family; husband and son are the only persons to whom she relates.⁴⁶⁰ She cannot understand why her husband, who persists in heaping luxurious presents upon Audrey and their son, has abandoned her after fourteen years of marriage. Her dilemma is that despite her dependency upon her Chinese husband, she is unable to change her Western attitudes toward the Chinese and to develop new patterns of relationships that dispense with racial hierarchies. In addition, her passivity impedes her fighting openly for her husband. She "had to resort to trickery"⁴⁶¹ in order to maintain an identity. When her son is ordered to leave Shanghai, she is left with nothing except her material possessions to furnish her with an identity.

As the older generation is caught in its racialized configurations, the complex and afflicted relationships of Sylvia's and Feng's parents obviously cannot act as the ideal type of role. However, this does not mean that their own age-group has already solved the conflicts of their parents. The tragic affair of Sylvia's and Feng's friends Mimi Lambert and Robert Bruno reveals how the children reproduce the value systems of their parents and how difficult it is to develop a new view, not only of the relationship between the sexes, but of cultures and society.

Mimi is introduced in *The Frontiers of Love* through Sylvia's voice, who tries to describe her in contradistinction to herself: "Sylvia thought only how differently Mimi and she had turned out. They could have been as similar as sisters. The same racial

⁴⁵⁷ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 245.

⁴⁵⁸ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 27.

⁴⁵⁹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 22.

⁴⁶⁰ For Audrey, Feng increasingly replaces her former husband as she tries to keep Feng as close to her as possible.

⁴⁶¹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 27.

ingredients had gone into the making of them."⁴⁶² The common component in their identities is their race and gender affiliation, which they interpret in different ways. Although Mimi is as biracial as Sylvia is, she exhibits a surface contentment with her race identity. Rejecting the Chinese part of her mixed race heritage, she does not consider herself Eurasian, let alone Chinese, and strives to emphasize her European ancestry. Already as a child, she "wanted to be a beautiful orphan, a mysterious orphan, for no one would be able to guess my nationality."⁴⁶³ She rejects wearing Chinese dresses, avoids speaking Chinese, and is pleased when Chinese people mistake her for a French, Spanish, Gypsy or Creole woman. This suppression of the Chinese part in herself does not really wipe out her racial bipolarity but leads to a psychological trauma when Robert rejects her on the grounds of her mixed race status.

Sylvia not only attributes Mimi's self-confidence to her accentuation of her Western origins, but also to her possession of a feminine identity. Sylvia is only "feminine by suggestion; she's lavish."⁴⁶⁴ What Sylvia naively regards as natural femininity results in fact from Mimi's incorporation of the traditional requirements of the beauty myth, dress and appearance: "Mimi wore a dress with a voluminous skirt and shoulder straps which needed constant adjusting: she moved a gleaming shoulder forward and replaced a strap and smoothed a lock of her heavy, wavy hair in a single slow movement."⁴⁶⁵ Later on, Mimi clearly refutes Sylvia's opinion of her and discloses the well-rehearsed constitution of her "femininity".

Long ago when she was twelve, she had studied herself in the mirror and decided how to toss her hair back, how to cross her impeccable legs, how to look into a boy's eyes for maximum results. Having mastered her own personality, she was almost able to forget it - at least, to forget it enough so that even that forgetfulness added to her charm. She was carelessly beautiful, lazily feminine, casually flirtatious.⁴⁶⁶

She has fashioned her body in the right mixture of exotic beauty and sexual appeal in order to assert her femininity. Her ungrudging acceptance of her role manifests itself in her behavior, her movements, and her performances. All of these produce the image of a sexualized, aesthetic commodity, which is available for the male consumer: "She's unmarried, Sylvia thought, but she marries whomever she turns to,

⁴⁶² Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 11.

⁴⁶³ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 129.

⁴⁶⁴ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 12.

⁴⁶⁵ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 12.

⁴⁶⁶ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 33.

talks to, smiles at. Whomever she dances with, Mimi is all faithful to. . . . It was a talent all the men recognized and one which inspired both Robert's love and his anxiety."⁴⁶⁷

For the thirty-four-year-old Robert Bruno, it is not only Mimi's corporeality but also her vivacity which contrasts his own despondency and makes her so attractive: "'You put me in touch with life,' he had once said to her."⁴⁶⁸ He feels worn out from the complex relationship to his authoritarian and prejudiced father whose dogmatism Robert does not dare to challenge openly. Only among his friends does he condemn his father, who, as he believes, "'will finally understand. His crystal ball reflects only the early rites of the twentieth century. It is out-of-date, useless, blind to the future. Colonialism is a cruel act; it mixes progress with exploitation."⁴⁶⁹ While Robert's alcoholism is a means of escape from the colonialist world of his father, his relationship to Mimi represents a halfhearted rebellion against the laws that govern this world. In fact, his resistance is an act of utmost hypocrisy because he continues having sex with her, although he knows that in accordance with his father's plans, he will not marry her. His final denial of marriage to Mimi entails her degradation to a sexual object and reproduces processes of colonization, which he excoriates so much in his father, in the realm of sexuality.

Despite some differences between the two women, Mimi's relationship to Robert parallels Sylvia's in some instances. In the first place, her strategy to stabilize her identity is that of acquiring a new self by seeking dependency on a man whose qualities compensate for her imaginary deficiencies. A Chinese lover, for instance, is unthinkable for her, but the older, wealthy Swiss man can provide what she wants: "She wanted to be of his world. . . . Now she knew that by loving him, she was assured of status for herself and a 'society' to which to belong."⁴⁷⁰ She completely submits herself to his power.

Mimi's addiction to Robert is evident in her constant asking for proof of his love and in her permanent evocation of eternity. To ensure his love and to exercise control over his emotions, she subtly utilizes her beauty and her eroticism. Her way to fulfillment is an indirect one: she attempts to bind him to herself by offering her body as prey. In spite of all her unconventional standards of behavior, Mimi's aims

⁴⁶⁷ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 12.

⁴⁶⁸ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 33.

⁴⁶⁹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 40.

⁴⁷⁰ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 74.

are, as her Aunt Juliet avers, "bourgeois, quite narrow."⁴⁷¹ She wants to lure him into marriage and to raise a family. Her single-mindedness and her focus on her own ideals obstruct the examination and realization of Robert's needs.

Instead of recognizing the many facets of Robert's personality, Mimi clings to the picture she has of him. This is a further parallel to Sylvia's relationship to Feng. She does not really understand his commentaries, does not even attempt to interpret them: "Mimi was not analytical, and even though Robert did and said inexplicable things which made her happy or sad. . . . she carried around with her only a single impression of the man she loved."⁴⁷² Consequently, she ignores all those verbal and non-verbal signs which offer clues to Robert's entrapped state of mind.

Therefore, Robert's confession that he cannot marry her because his father objects to her biracial status takes her by surprise. It is not only Mimi's insight into her own sexual exploitation which causes a deep emotional shock, it is also an extreme psychic disintegration which disturbs her precarious mental balance. Firstly, she loses her primary figure of identification with Robert. Secondly Robert's capitulation to his father's colonialist values involuntarily confront her with the repressed element of her selfhood. In contrast to Sylvia, Mimi is unable to arrive at a complexly fragmented identity formation, she cannot see herself as consisting of many different people. She concludes that "after all was said and done, you had only yourself, an instrument with which to create your own reality. An instrument which, like merchandise, had a price on it."⁴⁷³ She continues to follow the path she has chosen. She wants to get rid of China because "[I]f, she felt, was 'out there' somewhere. It resided in an Emerson Howell, who could put her in contact with everything that mattered."⁴⁷⁴ Once again, Mimi subordinates herself to men, consents to her sexual objectification, and upholds the male design imposed on her.

While Chang allows Sylvia and her father to grow in crucial ways and recognize what was or is wrong with the relationships between the sexes, many of the other characters in the novel remain in those painful quagmires into which they have been ushered by social conceptions of race and gender. In turn they reinforce power relations which are nurtured by these very constructions. In all the various relationships in the novel, one distinctive pattern as expressed in the title emerges.

⁴⁷¹ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 173.

⁴⁷² Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 34.

⁴⁷³ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 230.

⁴⁷⁴ Chang, *The Frontiers of Love*, 230.

Love is an experience which is structured by personal and also by social expectations. It is not merely the transcending, private emotion as it is conventionally perceived, but a terrain vaguely circumscribed by wider political issues. Especially for the major female characters Sylvia and Mimi, their idea of romantic love turns into an instrument of inequality because they believe that their relationships necessitate the negation of selfhood and the complete identification with the other. Here, the title of the novel serves as a reminder not to strive for a false identity, which is built on a dependent attachment to a man, but to acknowledge the "frontiers of love" in order to develop or retain a satisfying self-image.

6.2.3. Summary

If there is a single distinguishing feature of Josephina Niggli's *Step Down, Elder Brother* and Diana Chang's *The Frontiers of Love*, it is their tendency to undermine conventional notions of what is possible for female and male characters and how their relationships should be structured. Both authors take the trouble to record the experiences of minority women and men with respect to their gender roles. These roles make the realities of being a woman or a man deviate from those conceptions which have been developed in academic circles.

Both Niggli and Chan tentatively question the identity categories, which underlie the theoretical discussion, and also demonstrate in different ways how the relationships between the sexes are essentially shaped by various, interacting parameters such as class and race. The majority of the characters in the two novels feel the rigid boundaries imposed on them by policed categories, and some of them become conscious of the instabilities of gender, class and race identification and even avow an other within themselves. At the same time as *Step Down, Elder Brother* and *The Frontiers of Love* reveal the psychological consequences of such arbitrary categorizations, they thematize the impact of gender, class and race on the relationships between women and men. While Niggli's emphasis lies on how women's and men's roles are informed by the notion of class differences, Chang points out how the social construction of races, of their purity and superiority forms a fundamental force in shaping women's and men's relationships.

Stereotypical concepts of feminine and masculine features and roles serve patriarchy in its consolidation of power relations because they leave the gender division unchanged. As such, the advice of both novels to endorse hybridity and to soften the boundaries of those categories which are meant to define human identities, threatens the substance of patriarchal society. The revelation of the conjunction of class, race, and gender in damaging male-female relationships is not meant to prepare the foundation of a new hierarchy. Instead it leads to the affirmation of antihegemonic constructions of relationships. Strikingly, Niggli as well as Chang argues that the varying forms of domination matter for everyone. They delineate in their male protagonists how patriarchal structures also damage the identities of men either by dehumanizing them or by pressurizing them into socially prescribed roles.

Both authors dream of a society where heterogeneity and multiplicity substitute for essentialized identities, where overdetermined social roles, which are based on hierarchically ordered categories, give way to the freedom for each individual to choose one's way. However utopian this dream of de-emphasizing categorical differences and of transcending social determinants may be, it entails the still appealing vision that one day, an individual might be able to take up a diverse, even contradictory, subject position and live up to the myriad potentialities of humanity.

6.3. Exploring the Opportunities for Self-Development

While biographic information about the African American author Sadie Mae Rosebrough and her book *Wasted Travail* is unavailable, the Japanese American psychologist Monica Sone and her publication *Nisei Daughter* has received more attention.⁴⁷⁵ In view of the fact that both authors have published only one book, this disparity is surprising. One explanation could be that Sone's book invites greater critical interest because it is one of the few nonfiction accounts of Japanese American experiences during the World War II internment written by a woman. In contrast Rosebrough's text adds to an already existing, rather extensive body of black women's literature about issues of social justice.

⁴⁷⁵ Sadie Mae Rosebrough. *Wasted Travail*. New York: Vantage Press, 1951; Monica Sone. *Nisei Daughter*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953.

Both authors chose the autobiographical form to tell their story as convincingly as possible, even though the stories represent only extracts from life, not its totality. Rosebrough fictionalized some of her experiences in order to discuss her concerns more openly. The two narratives differ regionally: one setting oscillates between South and North, the other is in the West, but they cover similar time spans: they begin in the early 1900s and stretch into the immediate postwar years. Despite the writers' self-reflexive and introspective disposition in *Wasted Travail* and *Nisei Daughter*, it is not that they merely aim at tracing the singular development of their own psyche and character. More important than their direct or subtle criticism of themselves is their translation of their personal difficulties into political terms. This transformation alters and assigns new meaning to conventional assumptions of the female self and hence to dominant gender ideologies.

6.3.1. Sadie Mae Rosebrough's *Wasted Travail* (1951)

In thirteen short, loosely connected chapters, *Wasted Travail* follows the young first-person narrator named Taffy from her girlhood somewhere in Alabama to her adult years in Detroit. Feeling dangerously suffocated by the hostility and repression in the South, Taffy embarks on a journey through the country which she hopes will secure her own space where she can lead a free, fulfilled life unhindered by racism and sexism. At first, her odyssey from the South to Memphis, New York City, Washington D.C., Depew, Buffalo and Detroit bestows upon her little more than disillusionment with the hollowness of American democracy. However in time she not only falls in love and marries, but finally is even able to recover from her despair.

All her life, Taffy feels haunted by her mother's exclamation at her birth "that her travail was wasted."⁴⁷⁶ As her mother reacts completely different to the birth of her twin brother, Taffy is impelled to see her sex as the source of her mother's disappointment. In rejecting her daughter, the mother reproduces the very values which underlie her own powerless position. Her repudiation and her lack of affection strain the girl's self-esteem beyond her understanding. Like a theme, the motif of "wasted travail" recurs throughout the book and marks Taffy as an undesirable object. Even from the detached point of view of an adult, Taffy is only occasionally

⁴⁷⁶ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 8.

able to honor her mother because she is still torn between daughterly love and pent-up hate.

Taffy's feeling of rejection is fueled by the combination of being a girl and being black. She experiences very early that this combination determines her inferior status and that she is destined to assume a specific role which denies her self-respect and self-expression. While she is confronted with the neighbor boys' racist practices, she is not allowed to speak about it:

I wanted to tell Mr. Rub, the storekeeper, what I had seen and heard; I wanted to cry, say things, many things, but I thought about my mother and what she had said. Who would want to hear anything a patched-clothing Negro girl in a wood-filled wagon on a lonely country road had to say?⁴⁷⁷

Taffy is not allowed to speak out against it, because in spite of the aggressors' social status as outcasts, they are white boys and therefore superior to her. Having been ordered to silence by her mother and yet needing to cope with her experiences of discrimination, Taffy only finds some release by talking to herself, a habit which increasingly turns into second nature. Yet her mother's reiterated words, which Taffy imagines as the "whiplash that my heckled mother cowed me with,"⁴⁷⁸ loom as a constant admonition in her thoughts: "Don't talk, keep quiet; nobody wants to hear anything you say. Draw into your black shell like the homely turtle."⁴⁷⁹ Therefore, before crusading against inequality and injustice, Taffy first has to rescue herself from the paralyzing quiescence and passivity that is imposed on African American women. Her internalization of the image of the mute and invisible black woman renders Taffy's vow "to prove that my mother's words were wrong, untrue"⁴⁸⁰ especially problematic. What can she do as a woman who is doomed to silence?

Having provided the book's basic themes of oppression, silence and resistance in the opening chapter, the narrator goes on to delineate her unexpected strategy that she devises in order to solve her dilemma. She attempts to erase most signs of her womanhood to justify and legitimize her (narrative) resistance to ideologies of black women's speechlessness, passivity and inferiority. Exempting herself from womanhood and identifying with maleness enables her to "master" the discrepancy between role and desire. As a consequence of the narrator's negotiation between her fictive and her actual sex/gender, the presentation of her life, which is meant to

⁴⁷⁷ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 11.

⁴⁷⁸ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 8.

⁴⁷⁹ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 14.

⁴⁸⁰ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 14.

change her gender image, necessarily proceeds with insecurities, contradictions and omissions. These reveal the particular limitations the black woman writer must overcome in order to be heard.

On the linguistic level, Taffy's resort is complemented by the use of a markedly masculinized rhetoric, which pervades her whole narrative.⁴⁸¹ She presents herself in a new, industrial environment, working and sweating at a war plant together with a Russian fellow worker. His invitation to "tell me how *men* are born"⁴⁸² exemplifies the way in which the generic "man" begins to supersede "women".

Encouraged by the empathy of this nameless worker, the narrator elaborates her idea of life being war, thus approaching her life and her self in entirely other terms than family-centeredness or motherhood. Despite her inner musings that "my life as a whole was a cheat, and the only advancement I could claim was a job that had been created by the horrors of war,"⁴⁸³ Taffy's account of her own and her people's experiences of discrimination is notably devoid of hints to the specific situation of black women except for an occasional allusion to the sexual exploitation of female slaves. Her de-gendered reproaches call forth her co-worker's emphatic advice to combat her dissatisfaction with society and "fight back in the proper manner."⁴⁸⁴ Like Taffy, he foregrounds the black male as the victim of repressive structures and puts the purpose of the fight against racism into an unequivocally masculine and individualistic context. "'Have you,' he asked, 'ever tried to figure out how to challenge the world and really become boss of your own destiny? Of course, it can't be done at once; but it can be done.'"⁴⁸⁵ To ignore racial and social determinisms and to view oneself as the "boss of one's own destiny" is a privilege of power which is only enjoyed by those who can forget their skin color or their sex. This white man's model of a sovereign, free existence turns out to be particularly appealing to Taffy. Living alienated from her family and roaming about the country, Taffy has never established close links to other women or men; she is without support from friends and cannot conceive of life in relationship to others. Her self-consciousness

⁴⁸¹ In this context, even her name which may be derived from the word "tough" has a masculine connotation. Yet, there is another interpretation of the heroine's name which has been suggested to me by Lara Christianson. She associates "Taffy" with the sticky, pliable, super-sweet and soft candy. In this context, "Taffy" is the opposite of tough and point at ultra-feminine qualities. These readings of the protagonist's name are less contradictory than they might appear, because they successfully reflect Taffy's gender conflicts.

⁴⁸² Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 20, my emphasis.

⁴⁸³ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 22.

⁴⁸⁴ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 25.

⁴⁸⁵ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 23.

reinforces her solitariness. She readily accepts one of her colleague's recommendations of soul searching to find the solution to her predicament primarily within herself before battling for equality. Her first attempts at assuming a more self-confident posture fail, because renewed confrontations with prejudices and race hatred forcefully remind her of her own powerlessness. Extremely painful is her recurrent realization that the open expression of anger is not a feasible alternative for her; she sees her only option in retreating into her imagination:

Words sprang to my lips, but I said nothing. I wanted to shout them at her - to tell her that darkies were put on the battlefields when America needed more blood to protect its security. . . . I wanted to ask her if she had ever cherished a dream - a dream of common ground on which to stand with other men in an atmosphere of true freedom.⁴⁸⁶

Here, in identifying the thrust of the narrator's protest, *Wasted Travail* shows a remarkable anticipation of Martin Luther King's famous vision. But unlike King, Taffy does not voice her dream: "Who would listen to me?" she asks.⁴⁸⁷ Her autosuggestion, her attempt at masculine verballity, has clear limits. Her notion of black womanhood, which excludes strong assertiveness, insists on silence at this moment.

In desperation, she begins a new life in Buffalo as a bus driver, and it is here that she finds once again a sympathetic listener whose interest in her life lessens her sorrows and more importantly reminds her that as an adult woman she might find at least some emotional fulfillment. Taffy's first reaction consists of rejection: she only "looked at him again, this time questioning his conception of human lives"⁴⁸⁸ and instantly runs away. The idea of a woman in love is obviously incompatible with her ideal of a lonesome fighter against intolerance. In order to avoid emotional involvement, Taffy deliberately tries to put him out of her mind. After her second encounter with the Reverend Bill Evergreen, her listener, which occurs as haphazardly as before, her own affection becomes troubling for her: "But, although I felt as flushed and foolish as a schoolgirl at times, I was moody and I felt that love and the role of wifehood had no place in my justice-seeking program."⁴⁸⁹ For her, marriage is a social institution, which implies a role for women Taffy understands to

⁴⁸⁶ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 42.

⁴⁸⁷ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 42.

⁴⁸⁸ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 38.

⁴⁸⁹ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 46.

be subordinate and limited. Her wooer cannot see why marriage restricts her options to fight for true democracy, and his arguments finally convince Taffy to marry him:

Your moods, your fears, your memories, and your desired isolation cannot undo what has grown into something beautiful and big for me. And you shouldn't allow them to take your happiness away. Put them behind you and give your heart a chance for once in your life. Let it rule you and your decision. You say you've never had a home; no one to love you. Well, I'm standing ready. . . .⁴⁹⁰

This is the only scene in *Wasted Travail* where the narrator gives up her reticence about her emotional intimacies and risks being positively identified as a (heterosexual) woman. Thereafter, her husband personally enters the narrative stage only one more time, and Taffy consistently avoids mentioning her marriage and her husband. Her pregnancy and her miscarriage surface in a peripheral question from her doctor, who is treating her chronic diseases. Thus, she disconnects herself largely from singularly feminine images. Despite this rare, guarded hint at the existence of a heterosexual relationship, she pretends that she has neither a sexual identity nor a life outside her quest for equality between the races. Refusing to admit or share any emotion other than her racial injuries, she conceals so much of her thoughts, her feelings, and her inner self that she evokes the impression of using a disguise to defend herself against society's negative assessment of black women.

Slowly, however, Taffy can reach her early formulated aim of "trying to become well educated in order that I might at least gain a one-man audience to hear my story, as I saw it."⁴⁹¹ Her marriage evidently enables her to quit the unloved job as bus driver and to enroll in college to study journalism. And even though Taffy persists in ignoring the topic of her marriage, it seems to involve a change in more ways than education. Firstly, she describes herself for the first time as a "Negro woman". Secondly, she understands more urgently the need to speak. As she overhears two white men condemning the social improvement of African Americans, she does not simply swallow her rage. ". . . I gaped at them and they stopped talking."⁴⁹² She is still far away from articulating the full emotional intensity of her feelings, but she moves closer to it. Interestingly, her continual question "But who'd listen to me?" is supplemented by a second, new question: "Who was I, anyway?" Her answer refers to a new self-image: She is "[j]ust Taffy, my instructor's average pupil; my husband's

⁴⁹⁰ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 46f.

⁴⁹¹ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 18.

⁴⁹² Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 49f.

loving wife."⁴⁹³ Both education and marriage seem to provide her with a more positive self-definition. Rosebrough does not leave Taffy frozen in *Wasted Travail*. She begins to act, but her doubts do not disappear immediately:

Life, I decided, was yet too confusing a pattern for me to understand. One day you overtax your brain cells in an effort to arrive at what might correctly termed legitimate solutions to the varying problems. You decide you have the answer at last; then the very next day a huge, buglike problem creeps upon you, and jolts you back into your old rut, jabbing at you with its feelers until you feel like a pot of overcooked beets. Maybe there were no answers to some things. . . .⁴⁹⁴

Acceptable as the combined remedy of education and marriage now may be, it does not provide absolute protection for the person and the mind for which it is utilized. Taffy's experiences of humiliation and degradation do not cease, and she continues to feel vulnerable instead of immune. Even though she thinks about retreating from the public to the sheltering privacy of her home, to "leave this writing business alone and settle down to a career of housekeeping"⁴⁹⁵ does not provide a solution either. She knows that a purely domestic role is primarily an escape from her problems. Even though her course in journalism does not make up for her lingering uncertainties, she comes to understand her own power to speak, to be heard, and she slowly learns to convey feelings.

In this context, Rosebrough's explanation of why Taffy finally finds contentment forces the reader to take an incredulous stance. The concluding chapter is entirely devoted to the last of the many interior dialogues of the narrator. Returning from one of her consultations with her kindly white doctor, Taffy comes to realize her own biased nature, her internalization of prevalent social stereotypes. She reproaches herself with being prejudiced, too, and tries to persuade herself of the acceptability of the American status quo. She begins to see herself and society in a new light. But when she simultaneously associates equality with her mother, she betrays the self-delusive dimension of this ideal of equality: "My mother's eyes were there now, and I could see her, tired and worn, confused, and discouraged, as she struggled to rear nine hungry children on a rocky hillside."⁴⁹⁶ Taffy's subliminal awareness of black women's circumscribed possibilities, of the limits of their lives, makes her final

⁴⁹³ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 53.

⁴⁹⁴ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 56.

⁴⁹⁵ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 68.

⁴⁹⁶ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 85.

insistence on having recognized that the "horrible situation balances"⁴⁹⁷ particularly doubtful.

A second reason for the lacking conviction of Rosebrough's explication of her protagonist's personal accomplishment is the incident she cites which allegedly leads to Taffy's awakening. She observes a protest march by a group of black activists, who demonstrate against police violence. Taffy refuses to understand why the protesters accuse a white policeman of having murdered a black man, whom he had caught in the act of stealing a car. Instead of joining the march, Taffy indicts "her people" for their one-sidedness and retreats into her house. While Rosebrough allows her heroine to shed caging categorizations like race, class or gender, she denies her the ability to comprehend the workings of structural violence.

By having her heroine denigrate the collective protest of African American people, Rosebrough compels the reader to take an incredulous stance toward her development. I want to suggest a different interpretation of Taffy's final achievement. Since she ultimately finds an outlet for her feelings, she succeeds through heroic individual effort to rescue herself from controlling images of blackness and womanhood that left her transfixed in a psychic cage, and she finally moves toward freedom. Rosebrough's autobiographical novel delineates the narrator's development from the suppression of anger to the expression of anger. Throughout *Wasted Travail*, Taffy's creative aspirations are revealed and discouraged. At first, her artistic cravings are impeded by her mother, then her lack of education deters her, and finally, she is even ashamed of her writings. Yet, the narrator does not give up her cherished dream of becoming a writer who can communicate what she feels and thinks. Before she is able to write her story down, she comes to understand the power of orality. Taffy increasingly compensates for the destructive force of racism and sexism by talking and later by writing about it. The culmination, the summit of her verbality and her alliance with language, is the creative act of writing her own life story.

However, the narrator's reconciliation with being an African American woman is not merely due to her solitary strivings. Everywhere in the novel, Taffy intuitively searches for a listener whose attention decreases her tension and who takes her difficulties seriously. Hackneyed slogans of self-reliance and autonomy turn out to be rather disastrous panaceas for her. The existence of an eager audience is not only

⁴⁹⁷ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 89.

an important precondition for the realization of the healing power of words, but also of the political effect of words.

In the beginning, the narrator dissociates herself from all signs of her own gender in order to justify her strategy and to afford her some authority. The novel's concluding image connotes Taffy's final acceptance of her womanhood:

I walked briskly into my study, leafed through my files for my manuscript, and, turning to the last page wrote: NO TRAVAIL WASTED. Suddenly I felt a deeper calmness and satisfaction . . . like someone who had suddenly ended a life of searching and adventure and had arrived safely home.⁴⁹⁸

While this passage presents our heroine as a black woman who has found her place in the world, the distinction between public and private seems to sustain more conventional patterns of gender roles. This pattern of public masculinity and private femininity, however, has to be seen in the context of Rosebrough's whole narrative. She resists being entrapped by gender ideologies by constructing her "private" experiences as political issues in the fight against racism and thus challenges women's exclusion from the public sphere. Her awareness of the specific situation of black women makes her define womanhood on more progressive terms as a part of a political battle.

The overt revolt in this text is against racism, not sexism. Implicitly, however, *Wasted Travail* enters into the postwar male-female debate because in showing how the development of a black woman's self is clearly informed by both race and gender, the text redefines female identity in racialized terms. The narrator is imprisoned by experiences of oppression and stereotyping resulting from the ideology of white *and* male superiority, but she finds a way to operate within the "blind spots" of this ideology to move into an integrated personality.

6.3.2. Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953)

In her autobiography *Nisei Daughter*, Monica Sone remembers the first twenty or thirty years of her life and portrays the experiences of a Japanese American girl growing up in the international sector of Seattle, the internment of the Japanese American community during the period of World War II, and her own educational and

⁴⁹⁸ Rosebrough, *Wasted Travail*, 89f.

professional success within mainstream society. Accordingly, her autobiography can be subdivided into three phases, which strongly vary in tone and diction.⁴⁹⁹ The first focuses on her childhood world, which is centered around her parents and the Japanese American ghetto. Sone begins her project of tracing the different stages of her developing ego with an incidence in her early life which causes an uproar in the formerly stable self-understanding of the six-year old girl. Even though she does not immediately catch the meaning of her initiation into her Japanese identity, she resents the consequences: she has to attend a Japanese school in place of enjoying her playtime. As she grows older, Kazuko Itoi- Sone's Japanese name - finds it increasingly confusing to belong to two different worlds. She sometimes feels like a stranger in both of them. As the political tension between the two nations increases, so do the prejudices of which Kazuko has always been aware .

The middle section of the narrative begins with the outbreak of the war and revolves around the traumatic experience of camp imprisonment. The feeling of being detested and punished for her Japanese ancestry constitutes a strong assault on her sense of belonging to American society. Despite her awareness of prevailing racist attitudes and practices, Kazuko endeavors to restore her sense of self-worth, and she does so by escaping her imprisonment and entering a college in a midwestern city. The third part of *Nisei Daughter* depicts this isolated process of complete assimilation in the Midwest and ends, by her own profession, with Kazuko's attainment of self-integration.

On the surface, Kazuko's story of coming-of-age in America appears to be a humorous, flattering document of Japanese American heroism and success proving the assimilative dreams of the Asian American "model minority". The narrated development from an Edenic early childhood to a racially tainted adolescence and the protagonist's encounter with racism leading to personal fulfillment and eventual wholeness superficially warrants such a reading. However to view *Nisei Daughter* only as the straightforward story of a Japanese American woman's successful assimilation into an established system ignores Sone's inability to escape codes that shape and define her as Japanese and/or as woman. While classification according

⁴⁹⁹ Sone's complete autobiography, and especially the first part which deals with her childhood reminiscences, is marked by a humorous and self-mocking tone. This lightness should not lead critics to understate the seriousness of Sone's topic of alienation. One example is Stephen Sumida. "Protest and Accommodation, Self-Satire and Self-Effacement, and Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*". *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*. Ed. James Payne. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992. 207-247.

to ethnic origin makes her self-understanding problematic, different ideas of womanhood further confound the development toward personal coherence. Until the end, the text demonstrates the confusion of identity formation through conflicting and converging gestures. Upon closer examination, the autobiography reveals how the author is caught up in a tangle of cultural race and gender constructions while she apotheoses one cultural system and disparages another. Sone's proof of her progressive psychic integration is contradicted by her neverending sense of being different.

The book's title, *Nisei Daughter*, whose simplicity is deceptive, bears witness to this fragile design. Analogous with the title, the autobiographical self relies both on Japanese and American elements to create a racial and gender identity. This identity is fostered by Sone's understanding of her deviation from Japanese and American constructions of race and gender. In fact her identity constitutes a challenge to the universal validity of the values of each cultural system. Moreover the title shows that Sone's self-perception has to be regarded in light of the limited options which both cultural repertoires open up to a woman.

Sone's primary identification as a daughter refers to the central relevance of the mother for the process of female individuation. Although Sone refrains from depicting the subtleties and implications of the mother-daughter dyad, her mother as a figure of race and gender consciousness plays an important role for her own struggle toward self-definition. Despite the liberalism of her mother's family, its organizational structures have been patriarchal. Kazuko's grandfather, who decided to immigrate because of "the freedom and educational opportunities in America,"⁵⁰⁰ obviously did not have his three daughters in mind. Regarded as disposable property to be bartered, Benko and her older sister Yasuko are engaged to men who are strangers to them. A picture bride in an arranged marriage at twenty-two, Yasuko finally drowns herself because she is most unhappy with the husband her father has chosen. She does not want to suffer patiently, and suicide is less strongly disapproved of than divorce in the "respectable" Japanese community.⁵⁰¹ Even though Benko's own experience with the practice of betrothal and marriage is less tragic, she repudiates the utilization of it in the case of her own daughter and spares Kazuko the feeling of being an expendable object.

⁵⁰⁰ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 6.

⁵⁰¹ Compare Esther Mikyung Ghymn. *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers*. Many Voices: Ethnic Literatures of the Americas 1. New York: Peter Lang, 1995. 73-105.

The mother not only defies the tradition of matchmaking, which traditionally puts women at greater disadvantage than men, but she also undermines the perpetuation of social hierarchies. She does not prepare her daughter to take her place in the patriarchal family order.

Many of my high-school classmates had been married off soon after graduation. They had learned long ago to cook and sew, knit and crochet pineapple tablecloths and popcorn bedspreads, and they had been swamped with marriage offers by the baishakunins, go-between negotiators of marriages. Mother had utterly failed in her efforts to domesticate me, and I hadn't attracted a single nibble.⁵⁰²

Her mother is a contradictory model of identity for Kazuko. Above all, Benko is different from other Japanese mothers and Kazuko, who is familiar with her parents' history, explains: "It was because Mother had come to America at the wrong age, when the cement of Japanese had not yet been set."⁵⁰³ Although she is definitely not American, she relies on very few Japanese customs. She does not raise her children the way a Japanese woman would, and she does not cook exclusively or typically Japanese. She is lively instead of reserved, spirited instead of stoic. Kazuko portrays her mother as a source of strength and disconnects her from the stereotype of the subservient, silently suffering Japanese woman. She does not correspond to Japanese definitions of womanhood: "In fact, she rattled the sensibilities of some of the more correct women in the neighborhood. . . . Mother tried hard. She cultivated a gentled and soft-spoken manner and even managed a poker face when the occasion demanded, but underneath, Mother was a quivering mass of emotions."⁵⁰⁴

Yet at the same time, Kazuko's mother is a representative of Japanese culture. She acquaints her daughter with Japanese food, traditions and literature. As an ambiguous model of orientation, the mother neither invites the daughter's direct identification with her, nor does she ease Kazuko's separation from her presence. While Kazuko clearly admires her mother for her cheerfulness and energy, the daughter cannot really rely on her guidance in the process of developing a stable standpoint because the mother transmits complex messages about what it means to be a Japanese woman in America.

Subject to only a few parental bans, Kazuko explores her dingy surroundings without inhibition and believes in her own unlimited freedom. Like a boisterous,

⁵⁰² Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 135.

⁵⁰³ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 48.

⁵⁰⁴ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 48.

quick-minded "Yankee" tomboy, she knocks about Skidrow, fights and spends her nickles on hot dogs and hamburgers.⁵⁰⁵ Even though the author treats the event only in a peripheral way, the first change in her ethnically homogeneous environment occurs when Kazuko has to leave her compact little world in order to attend the public grammar school. For the first time she comes into contact with "pale-looking children who spoke a strange dialect of English, rapidly like gunfire."⁵⁰⁶ Her encounter with the cultural diversity of American society, which she deems to be the discovery of "another enchanting world,"⁵⁰⁷ produces Kazuko's pluralistic idea of Americanness. While she claims to benefit from her introduction into the American institutional system, Kazuko's initiation into Japanese culture by way of Japanese school has a completely disconcerting effect. During these daily ninety minutes at Nihon Gakko School, she has to meet expectations for which her parents have not prepared her and which do not coincide at all with those standards of performance at Bailey Gatzert School: "I learned that I could stumble all around in my lessons without ruffling sensei's nerves, but it was a personal insult to her if I displayed sloppy posture."⁵⁰⁸ Kazuko understands very quickly that attending Japanese school does not simply mean learning Japanese language and grammar as her mother has indicated, but rather to indoctrinate her thinking and acting with Japanese principles.

Mr. Ohashi [the school principal] and Mrs. Matsui [a neighbor] thought they could work on me and gradually mold me into an ideal Japanese *ojoh-san*, a refined maiden who is quiet, pure in thought, polite, serene, and self-controlled. They made little headway, for I was too much the child of Skidrow. As far as I was concerned, Nihon Gakko was a total loss. I could not use my Japanese on the people at the hotel. Bowing was practical only at Nihon Gakko. . . . Life was too urgent, too exciting, too colorful for me to be sitting quietly in the parlor and contemplating a spray of chrysanthemums in a bowl as a cousin of mine might be doing in Osaka.⁵⁰⁹

For the critical Kazuko, the contrast between her American and Japanese life style appears too extreme to be enjoyable. Japanese traditions are neither practical nor applicable in the United States, an attitude which only changes when Kazuko visits Japan. In these surroundings some customs look more natural to her. Kazuko constructs clear cultural oppositions: American life is free and allows individual self-

⁵⁰⁵ After having been called a Yankee by a regular guest at the hotel, Kazuko imagines to be a Yankee. Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 19.

⁵⁰⁶ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 4.

⁵⁰⁷ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 18.

⁵⁰⁸ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 23.

⁵⁰⁹ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 28.

fulfillment; Japanese life is strictly regulated and constricted by social roles. Her awareness of the stifling restrictions for the Japanese female role leads her to repudiate her Japanese heritage. She nurtures the belief that she can discard it like some badly fitting clothes:

Nihon Gakko was so different from grammar school I found myself switching my personality back and forth daily like a chameleon. At Bailey Gatzert School I was a jumping, screaming, roustabout Yankee, but at the stroke of three when the school Bell rang and doors burst open everywhere, spewing pupils like jelly beans from a broken bag, I suddenly became a modest, faltering, earnest little Japanese girl with a small, timid voice.⁵¹⁰

While her mother is an inadequate model of Japanese femininity, Kazuko presents two girls whom she considers the epitome of the disdained Japanese ideals. In contrast to Kazuko, Yaeko, who is a few years older than Kazuko, knows that she "must not laugh out loud and show our teeth, or chatter in front of guests, or interrupt adult conversation, or cross our knees while seated, or ask for a piece of candy, or squirm in our seats."⁵¹¹ What Kazuko objects to is not only that Japanese standards of feminine behavior turn Yaeko into a dull and boring young lady, but that narrow role prescriptions also transform Yaeko into a vicious, superficial and hypocritical person.

Kazuko's Japanese cousin is her second example of Japanese femininity against which the young protagonist defines herself. She visits her father's family in Japan, and there she meets her cousin Yoshiye. As the opposite of the tomboy Kazuko, she exactly represents the ideal of the refined young lady with "restrained, delicate movements". For Kazuko, Yoshiye's social behavior leaves a lot to be desired. In retaliation for her selfishness, Kazuko slaps Yoshiye. As this climactic episode reveals, Kazuko violently vents her rejection of conventional Japanese femininity upon her cousin and simultaneously takes revenge for Yoshiye's taunt about her Japanese-accented English. Her aggression thus serves a double purpose: it severs her from the image of the passive Japanese maiden and it helps her renounce her Asianness and assert her affiliation to American culture.⁵¹² In a similar vein, Kazuko and her brother Henry get mixed up with a group of older neighborhood boys. Although their offensive is more directed at Henry, Kazuko also flares up at the

⁵¹⁰ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 22.

⁵¹¹ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 26f.

provocation because she feels once again that her self-image is at stake. She fights to show that she is no ordinary Japanese girl and proudly notes afterwards: "The boys tried to ignore me as all girls deserved to be ignored, but I noticed that they sneaked many side glances, puzzled and bewildered, for in their books, girls did not behave as I did."⁵¹³ Kazuko's actions reveal that she has turned to American concepts of identity which she believes are not based on female fragility, passivity and submission. Yet her departure from the Japanese tradition-bound culture does not mean that she has secured a firm and stable position in American society. *Nisei Daughter* discloses that Kazuko's struggle to qualify for membership in mainstream America is undermined by a set of mechanisms which despite their differences, successfully conspire to bind her to Japanese culture which she had hoped to leave behind.

Her entry into high school confronts her with new social requirements, which she feels almost unable to meet:

For eight years at Nihon Gakko, Bailey Gatzert and Central Grammar, I had done only what I was told by my teachers. I opened my mouth only in reply of a question. I became a polished piece of inarticulateness. At high school, the teachers expected us to have opinions of our own and to express them. In classes like civics, history, current events and literature, the entire class hour was devoted to discussion and criticisms. Although I had opinions, I was so overcome with self-consciousness I could not bring myself to speak. Some people would have explained this as an acute case of adolescence, but I knew it was also because I was Japanese.⁵¹⁴

Kazuko clearly senses that her mute condition is part of her being a Japanese girl in America. To defy Japanese values and to adapt to American criteria puts her under considerable pressure because she obviously lacks certain preconditions which are crucial for the fulfillment of these standards. Her self-confidence crumbles. Knowing that social recognition is not only built on achievement but also on the ability to please the other sex, Kazuko is further discouraged: "While most of our girl friends remained at a dainty five feet with tiny rosebud figures, Matsuko and I watched ourselves grow with helpless dread. It was a catastrophe. . . . At five feet six, I

⁵¹² See also Wong's careful interpretation of Yoshiye as Kazuko's racial alter ego. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. *Reading Asian American Literature. From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁵¹³ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 99.

⁵¹⁴ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 131.

capitulated to fate with Oriental stoicism. I decided calmly that if I were going to be an old maid, I might as well be one without quite so much fanfare and commotion."⁵¹⁵

When Kazuko falls ill with tuberculosis, she enters a sanitarium for nine months and, for the first time in her life, is crowded together with a group of white girls. Her forced, yet harmonious intimacy with them makes her once again aware of the existence of cultural differences between herself and her three roommates.

At the sanitarium, I noticed that I was not quite in step with my companions. The discrepancies came as tiny shocks to me, for I had been so sure of my Americanization. I had always annoyed Father and Mother with my towering pride on this point. I could speak English so much better than they could. I felt no hesitation in wearing blood red nail polish or violent purple lipstick. But here I started to lose my confidence.⁵¹⁶

Kazuko has to realize that conformity to dominant measures of beauty, as signaled through the application of cosmetics, neither erases her "Asianness" nor corroborates her successful assimilation to American society. She is not the all-American girl she has imagined and wished herself as, instead she has imbibed those Japanese values and norms which distinguish a proper Japanese woman. Her discernment of her difference is a slow process, but once understood, she decides to do something about it. The text reveals the dilemma that results from the narrator's deliberate dismissal of Japanese traditions and her continuing wish to belong to the Japanese community. It is problematic to belong to and be accepted by one's community and at the same time to reject the very terms by which the community defines and accepts a person. In addition, her resolution to jettison the Japanese codes of behavior is contradicted by her overjoyed conclusion that "Chris, Laura, Anne, Elaine and my other companions had accepted me into their circle as I was."⁵¹⁷ The contradiction, which goes totally undetected by Sone, is that white society does not perceive her as a race- and sexless person, but as a highly assimilated woman who tries not show her Asian descent.

Kazuko's desire to disprove her Japanese mold is additionally counteracted by American racism, which is intensified by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and World War II. In anticipation of future repression and restrictions, Kazuko feels "as if a fist had smashed my pleasant little existence, breaking it into jigsaw puzzle pieces. An old wound opened up again, and I felt myself shrinking inwardly from my

⁵¹⁵ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 130f.

⁵¹⁶ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 139f.

⁵¹⁷ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 143.

Japanese blood, the blood of an enemy."⁵¹⁸ Prejudice and hostility have always threatened the fragile construction of her American identity, but now her self-image and her belief in the American "paradise" are severely damaged. How then does the autobiographical heroine cope with this dual disillusionment?

Although the autobiography delineates the degrading and humiliating conditions of the relocation camps, Sone's focus is rarely on her internal turbulence. Her rendering of how she digests her experiences of internment, of modern mass incarceration, remains curiously reticent because she does not allow her fury and rebellion to surface. Yet the text permits the reconstruction of her various, but not necessarily connected, steps towards recuperation.

In the first place she is intent on maintaining her gender identity. On the momentous morning of their evacuation, she worries about her ruined hairdo, and the anxiety that her hair resembles either "scorched mattress filling" or "a frightened mushroom"⁵¹⁹ informs her daily life. She loves her dull administrative job because of the building's facilities: "During the remainder of the day, I slipped back into the rest room at inconspicuous intervals, took off my head scarf and wrestled with my scorched hair. I stood upside down over the basin of hot water, soaking my hair, combing, stretching and pulling at it. I hoped that if I was persistent, I would get results."⁵²⁰ Likewise, she feels acute embarrassment when the sweating and badly clothed evacuees are observed by white farmer families. Her preoccupation with her appearance reveals the tremendous strain under which Kazuko is to qualify as a woman in American society. Robbed of her sense of being an American, she is resolute to preserve her female identity. Even though the camp conditions relieve her of some problems - the *geta* craze for instance "solved my nylon problems, for I couldn't wear stockings with them"⁵²¹ - it also poses profound problems. During the cold winter months at Camp Minidoka in Idaho, they are forced to wear men's clothes. At first, Kazuko and her sister "haughtily announced that we would rather freeze than lose our femininity,"⁵²² but they give in when a fellow internee actually freezes to death. Sone's teasing tone, which accompanies all these incidents, does not hide the underlying text of stressing her gender identity during internment and inscribes the heroine's gender yearning into her narrative. The humorous tone,

⁵¹⁸ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 145f.

⁵¹⁹ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 167.

⁵²⁰ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 180.

⁵²¹ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 181.

however, that Sone employs is neither misleading nor simply decorative. In fact, Sone deliberately uses humor to restore her sense of self.⁵²³ The funny incidents in *Nisei Daughter*, which unmask white bigotry at the same as they destroy the image of the "yellow peril", work psychologically. They help Kazuko to reject self-contempt and to sustain her through tragedy. Humor serves in the autobiography as a form of relief in an otherwise unendurable situation of agonizing distress.

The process of disillusionment with white society that Sone undergoes is not complete because she keeps her faith in her own white friends and in democratic values. The most significant move toward personal coherence is her finally merging into white America and her separation from the Japanese community. To reestablish her belief in herself and society, Kazuko strikes out alone into the Midwest to erase her Japanese ancestry and get rid of restrictive social labels. Outside the community, then, she is no longer Kazuko, but Monica. To prove her American spirit, she even begins to exculpate her fellow students' acts of discrimination. In shedding her racial origin, she ". . . hoped that I might come to know another aspect of America which would inject strength into my hyphenated Americanism instead of pulling it apart,"⁵²⁴ and this wish seems to come true. However, what Sone chooses not to investigate are the implicit conditions of her dream which portray the falsities of her notion of complete assimilation.

I made up my mind to make myself scarce and invisible, but I discovered that an Oriental face, being somewhat of a rarity in the Midwest, made people stop in their tracks, stare, follow and question me. At first I was dismayed with such attention, but I learned it was out of curiosity and not hostility that they stared.⁵²⁵

Sone rejects accepting that her treatment as something of an oddity imposes on her the role of the exotic Asian woman, which is strangely at odds with the narrator's claim of being accepted the way she is. This passage presents her as an object being looked at, this time by the public gaze, rather than as an established individual. Comments on her English, which Sone prefers to interpret as compliments, actually reveal the reality of her outsider status. Thus, her integration into white society, which

⁵²² Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 196.

⁵²³ In opposition with my line of argument of how humor operates in *Nisei Daughter*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim has accused Sone of using humor in a trivializing way that precludes the revelation of the psychic costs of Japanese American internment. Shirley Geok-lin Lim. "Japanese American Women's life Stories: Maternity in Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*". *Feminist Studies* 16.2 (Summer 1990): 297.

⁵²⁴ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 216.

⁵²⁵ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 219f.

is so carefully described by Sone in the last two chapters, turns out to be illusory. The book's celebratory ending raises more questions than it answers:

I had discovered a deeper, stronger pulse in the American scene. I was going back into its main stream, still with my Oriental eyes, but with an entirely different outlook, for now I felt more like a whole person instead of a split personality. The Japanese and the American parts of me were blended into one.⁵²⁶

Sone's assertion of her reunified self is subtly contradicted by the contrast that is created between the "main stream" and her "Oriental eyes". It seems that while Kazuko claims to have found her individual fulfillment, she is still locked into the cliché of cultural incompatibility she so energetically attempts to disconnect herself from.⁵²⁷

In essence, then, *Nisei Daughter* cannot maintain Sone's initially pluralistic view on the meaning of American womanhood. The autobiography demonstrates how neither her mother nor the Japanese community can help her in finding inner stability and self-respect. The areas of conflict Sone confronts predominantly concern the question of her value in Japanese culture. Her attempt to find her place in mainstream society is slightly frustrated by virulent racism on the one and the realization of her own links to Japanese culture on the other hand. Especially in the face of injustice and repression, Sone's stilted ending raises doubts to the degree to which she is rooted in white America, but there are a few clues in her way of life that make her final content more plausible. Because of her vivid experiential sense of the terms that denigrate the female sex particularly within the Japanese community, Sone utilizes the chances she is offered by American society. Instead of marrying, she goes first to business school and later to college. Her concluding praise in the last chapter has to be understood in connection with the preceding visit to her aging parents in the camp. Vis-à-vis her parents' standstill or even regression, Kazuko particularly appreciates her own possibilities for self-development. Thus, the autobiography ends ironically, but not intentionally so. The very same system which allows a Japanese American woman to realize her dream of personal accomplishment, imprisons her parents and denies them citizenship.

⁵²⁶ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 238.

⁵²⁷ Cf. Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 113.

6.3.3. Summary

The contrast between *Wasted Travail* and *Nisei Daughter* and the intellectual notions of those elements that constitute womanhood is striking because they tremendously differ in emphasis if not in kind. The academic core topics of marriage, homemaking and motherhood are not only relegated to the margins of Rosebrough's and Sone's narratives, they are also infused with the authors' forceful interpretations of these issues. In both cases the meaning of gender is intensified by the meaning of race.

Both autobiographies interestingly present their heroines as personalities who appear to be neither particularly interested in nor particularly suited for marriage. Given their insights into the patriarchal character of society, their disinterest in marriage is hardly surprising. Still, marriage is not necessarily and only a form of female dependence. Rosebrough demonstrates that it can also entail an empowering alliance in an otherwise hostile environment.

In both texts, housewifery is treated as one option for women, but is it perceived neither as the ultimate aim of a woman nor as a real source of identification. Rather, *Wasted Travail* and *Nisei Daughter* show that minority women have to participate in the world outside the home, mostly in economic and occasionally in political terms. They endorse employment because the protagonists have to earn their living and they pursue public "success" because their inferior status makes them search for wider social acceptance. Here, however, Sone's position is entirely different from Rosebrough's. While Rosebrough aims at being recognized as an African American woman, the political tensions in the forties and fifties hardly allow Sone to be "acceptably" Japanese. As Elaine Kim observes, "the assertion of one's Japanese identity in America was viewed as a hostile gesture before and directly after World War II."⁵²⁸ As a result, Sone lamentably, but understandably, glorifies her American affiliation in a fashion Rosebrough does not.

While both authors do not explicitly identify themselves as potential or real mothers, the daughter perspective in both books de-romanticizes motherhood by projecting a political dimension into motherhood. For the daughters, the mother is a source of racial and sexual difference, and the daughters' separation from their racial-maternal origin is a matter of political as well as psychological exigency.

⁵²⁸ Elaine Kim. *Asian American Literature. An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982. 74.

Both these texts grapple with constructing a self in a society where racist and patriarchal forces intersect in producing an experience of internal division and deformity. The gender identity that they exhibit is not based on inherent qualities, but results from the protagonists' struggle with external oppression. *Wasted Travail* and *Nisei Daughter* lead away from the preoccupation with domesticity and familialism as the centerpiece of womanhood.

6.4. Constituent Elements in the Search for Autonomy

The African American author Elizabeth West Wallace has been entirely forgotten in literary histories excepting bibliographical compilations, which are by definition more exhaustive than historical works. While Wallace's personal background remains altogether in the dark, the life history of the Chinese American writer Jade Snow Wong's can at least partly be reconstructed from her autobiographical book *Fifth Chinese Daughter*⁵²⁹. In contrast to Wallace and her novel *Scandal at Daybreak*⁵³⁰, Wong, who claims to "have been rewarded beyond expectations,"⁵³¹ has gained some reputation among a well-informed readership interested in Chinese American history and literature.

That *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is still, or rather again, available on the book market is due to the growing amount and significance of Asian American women's writings, which is best represented by Maxine Hong Kingston and her successful *The Woman Warrior*. Wong certainly benefited from Kingston's wave of popularity, even more so because Kingston acknowledged *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as the predecessor of her bestseller: "I am not sure that I got help from a former generation of Chinese American writers except for Jade Snow Wong: actually her book was the only available one."⁵³² However, the postmodern interest in Wong's linear and chronological autobiography, as can be gleaned from a small series of critical articles

⁵²⁹ Jade Snow Wong. 1945. *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1989.

⁵³⁰ Elizabeth West Wallace. *Scandal at Daybreak*. New York: Pageant Press, 1954.

⁵³¹ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, VII.

⁵³² Angeles Carabi. "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston". *Belles Lettres* (Winter 1989): 11.

and commentaries is especially in comparison with the book's popularity in the postwar era, rather modest.⁵³³

Any speculators about the reasons for Wallace's omission must acknowledge the fact that other women writers of color who dealt with similar topics as Wallace were not necessarily doomed to falling into oblivion. Instead they aroused at least occasional reactions in the reading public. Although *Scandal at Daybreak* might be considered an expansion of the literary tradition of the African American search for material fulfillment that had been interpreted in the novel *The Street* by Ann Petry eight years before the publication of Wallace's novel, *Scandal at Daybreak* never received some portion of the exposure that *The Street* did. After the first edition, Wallace's novel was immediately out of print, whereas Petry's novel turned into a classic of American realism with more than a million and a half copies in print.

Analyzed in connection with the various sociological hypotheses which accompanied women's access to the working world, both *Scandal at Daybreak* and *Fifth Chinese Daughter* express unique views on the discussions of male and female spheres and the differences in education and labor, which the unequal distribution of power entails. The female characters they introduce share discriminatory patterns prevalent in American society for all women. However because of their precarious position in society, they are affected by inequities which determine their lives, values and survival in a peculiar way. Thus, Wong and Wallace present another version of womanhood as they felt and interpreted it. Their fuller exploration of minority women's complex experiences of the social and political structures shows to which extent they adopted elements from the intellectual definitions and carved out meaning for themselves by developing their own perspective of social and economic instruments.

6.4.1. Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945)

Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, which chronicles the author's life from her earliest remembrances to her mid-twenties, is one of the rare autobiographies

⁵³³ Because of its appraisal of American opportunities and democracy, Wong's book was officially supported by the US State Department. They not only negotiated for the translation rights, but also arranged for Wong to be sent on a four-month lecture tour through Asia. Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, VII.

written in the third person instead of being told by a first-person narrator. In foregrounding the narrator third-person, the autobiography jumps right into what is the central topic of the book and the central conflict in the writer's life: the personal attempt at self-realization in a cultural environment which disparages female individuality and independence. The narrative form as well as the title indicate that the protagonist, struggling to free herself from her father's embracing patriarchy, paradoxically rejects and reproduces his restrictive definitions. While Wong claims with *Fifth Chinese Daughter* to be fully subjective, her objectifying, third-person narrative point of view represses and mutes the subjectivity of her experiences. Her memoir, which is meant to delineate the specificity of her being, also integrates her by means of the title and the author's self-definition as a Chinese family member into her Chinese genealogy and traditions. The text reflects the tension which is central to the author's life and identity, arguing that Wong is an individual personality beside being a fifth Chinese daughter. The difficulty with Wong's autobiography, however, is that the rather general terms of the text allow only a tightly controlled view on the specific differences of Chinese American women and their peculiar perspectives on American society and its ideologies. Yet, in contrast to those critics who have already discussed Wong's text, I do not think that the title lamentably fails to reflect the text's proclamation of individuality. Rather, Wong's title bespeaks a very careful form of resistance to the Americanizing forces around her. Instead of embracing the American creed in its entirety, her particular experiences prevent her from becoming completely enslaved to dominant values and contribute to the development of a sound distance. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has been castigated as a narrative of uncritical assimilation. Yet there are too many instances in Wong's autobiography which are in stark contrast to the assimilative tenor of the text, to be accidental or unconscious representations⁵³⁴.

Wong was born in the Chinese American ghetto in San Francisco in the early 1900's, the fifth daughter of hardworking Chinese immigrants who are intent on giving their eight children the best education that is available in Chinatown. Her autobiography describes how she grows up in a strict household where maintaining order and teaching respect are greatly valued. The unrelenting parental lessons in filial duty, discipline and obedience fall on fertile soil, but Jade Snow becomes

⁵³⁴ See Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 59-61; Patricia Lin Blinde. "The Icicle in the Desert: Perspective and Form of Two Chinese American Women Writers". *MELUS* 6.3 (Fall 1979): 51-71.

increasingly aware of the anachronism and incongruity of Chinese traditions in American society. Being aware of women's inferior status within the Confucian ethos, Jade Snow's life is dominated by several vows. Firstly, she wants to prove her mother's capability of mastering her own and her children's lives. Secondly, she attempts to demonstrate her own female value by working devotedly for those personal successes and prizes which are usually reserved for men. Thirdly, she works to counteract dominant racial prejudices against the Chinese in the United States.

In order to invalidate the Chinese notion of women's inferiority and dependence, Wong identifies more intensely with American beliefs and principles, which she "officially" glorifies in order to locate herself in this cultural system as well. But despite her severe criticism of Chinese traditions, Jade Snow does not want to cut herself loose from her community. Therefore she resorts to the very principles which are highly valued within both Confucian and Puritan philosophy: education and employment. In defining life and success at the intersection of Chinese and American convictions and expectations, Jade Snow chooses a path which promises to be most successful, but it is also a path which turns her into something of a curiosity to both cultural systems. Wong learns that American society is built on women's submission to men, too, and that education and work are the means to ensure existing hierarchical structures. The autobiography repeatedly indicates that the author's "middle way" profoundly estranges her from both cultural systems,. However since Wong neither expressly acknowledges and penetrates into the reasons of this alienation nor thematizes her alienation constructively, her strategy of resistance to the dominant culture goes almost unnoticed.

Jade Snow's socialization occurs in an atmosphere of extensive industrial productivity and also of economic strain. Her parents have founded a sewing factory which produces clothes for a Euro-American enterprise, and since the family living quarters are situated above and next to the sewing rooms, "[h]ome life and work life were therefore mixed together. In the morning, Father opened the factory doors while Mother prepared a breakfast. . . . For the rest of the day Mother was at a machine except when she stopped to get the meals or to do other homework."⁵³⁵ Giving birth to one child after another until she is fifty, raising them, taking care of them and other kin, and contributing to the family's labor-intensive trade, the mother is toiling without

⁵³⁵ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 4.

recess for her family. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* paints a meticulous picture of her work situation in the garment factory and the employees' generally back breaking work. Apparently trying to set an example for her children, Wong's mother does not

"want my children to experience getting anything without first working for it, for they may become selfish. . . . Selfishness often starts with a spirit of dependency; therefore I want my children to learn to cope with the world, and to understand that they get what they want only after working for it."⁵³⁶

Her daughter's own definitions, resolutions and struggles result from her internalization and enlargement of this panacea for success. When her father refuses to support her university education, Jade Snow falls back on her mother's message, interpreting "You have to work for it *before* you get it" as "You have to work for it *and* you get it". Jade Snow carefully conceives a plan because she trusts that work brings its reward and therefore all she needs is to work to make her dreams come true.

According to Old World codes, the mother is confined to the factory-home save for occasional visits to the movie theater and New Year's Eve when "it was her privilege and desire to go out and enjoy the community gaiety for one evening."⁵³⁷ Apart from her - however restricted - power in the family, the position of Jade Snow's mother is extremely precarious because she is entirely dependent on her husband in her dealing with the outside world:

"If your father will not live, what will I do? He is nearly sixty, and you are all yet so small - Forgiveness is only five. Some unkind ones have already taunted me, saying that he will never see our children grown. They say that I know not the customs or language of this country and for survival I will be forced to abandon you and marry another. I have always ignored them, but now I have to admit that they are partially correct."⁵³⁸

As she is largely barred from the possibility of learning about the outside world, her job as seamstress in their family owned business obviously provides a major channel for socialization. Her daughter's comparison of the working conditions in their own factory and those in an American garment factory, which is twenty times larger than the Wong's, underscores the social meaning of the mother's labor in the factory:

It was the intensity of the Caucasian men and women piece workers who did not chat or stop one moment. A baby would have been unhappy and entirely out of place there. What a difference between the relaxed attitude

⁵³⁶ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 54.

⁵³⁷ The Old World refers to Asia whereas the New World means the American continent. Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 38.

⁵³⁸ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 80.

of the Chinese pieceworkers and the frantic preoccupation of the Caucasians.⁵³⁹

The organization of the manufacturing process also allows the presence of children, thus enabling the female employees to combine child-care and gainful employment. According to Chinese hospitality, the employees' children even have "guest status".

In addition to the factory workers, Jade Snow's parents employ Chinese homeworkers who are, like Mrs. Wong, confined to the home, but whose wage-earning labor is crucial to their families:

While most Chinese women in San Francisco still had to conform to the Old-World custom of staying at home, her father believed that according to New-World Christian ideals women had a right to work to improve the economic status of their family. Because they couldn't come to the factory, Mr. Wong took their work to them, installed and maintained their sewing machines, taught them how to sew, and collected the finished overalls.⁵⁴⁰

Although increasingly questioning the Chinese conviction of women's lesser value, Wong's description of the employment situation of Chinese women workers at this point is rather devoid of a critical distance. Only occasionally does she see the consequences, both positive and negative, which gainful employment involves for these women. Only in connection with her own life does Wong begin to challenge the distribution of power within the Chinese family, which confers on the male members the authority to decide on the life and activities of the female members.

Having been raised according to the doctrine of hard work, continual diligence and first-class performance, Jade Snow adopts these ideals without realizing that they have a different meaning for men and for women as her father begins to point out:

"Many Chinese were very short-sighted. They felt that since their daughters would marry into a family of another name, they would not belong permanently to their own family clan. Therefore they argued it was not worth while to invest in their daughters' book education. But my answer was that since sons and their education are of primary importance, we must have intelligent mothers. If nobody educates his daughters, how can we have intelligent mothers for our sons? If we do not have good family training, how can China be a strong nation?"⁵⁴¹

The father's philosophy of the significance of women's education is less open-minded and progressive than it seems at first glance, and if "American" is substituted for "Chinese" and "children" for "sons", the father's tenets resemble closely the

⁵³⁹ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 165.

⁵⁴⁰ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 5.

⁵⁴¹ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 14f.

educational concepts and aims of conservative American circles. Desideratum is a moderate education, which equips women for the upbringing of their sons; college is, as Wong's father explains, not necessary for a girl. Her parents' indifferent reaction to Jade Snow's high achievements at school is most disconcerting and disappointing for her. In spite of her zealous implementation of her parents' laws of hard work, their response confusingly lacks any enthusiasm.

Wong is caught in the contradictory standards her parents teach her: on the one hand they instill in her the desire for a superior education, on the other hand they deny her the very education they value so highly. Stubbornly, Jade Snow refuses to believe that being a girl means being "unalterably less significant than the new son in their family"⁵⁴² and fights against the patriarchal definition of her as valueless. She does not give up trying to wrestle some acceptance and recognition from her father, who unflinchingly continues to secure the patriarchal order.⁵⁴³ As she comes to attribute her feeling of entrapment to the prejudiced beliefs and practices of Chinese culture, Jade Snow decides to seek financial and spiritual comfort in mainstream society: "For two reasons, she decided that she would try working outside their factory-home. She thought that she could make a little more money and even if she didn't, she would at least escape from some of the continuous family friction."⁵⁴⁴ She leaves her home to make a place for herself in the (white) world. By superhuman efforts to finance her college entrance, she enters the labor market during her senior year at high school.

The only job the state employment service is able to get her is in domestic service. Working as a servant in the homes of white Americans, she obtains her first close look at non-Chinese families. Wong's recollections of her first occupation are marked by a strange contrast. Although she describes her employer Mrs. Schmidt as having been a "great friend . . . who treated her with utmost kindness,"⁵⁴⁵ her visual associations do not mirror this positive feature. Instead, she remembers "the perpetually darkened 'front room' with its heavy velvet drapes, drawn to keep the sun from fading the plush furniture, and her own weeping eyes as she peeled and ground

⁵⁴² Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 27.

⁵⁴³ Ghymn sees Wong's father in a completely different light. In foregrounding some of the father's comparatively progressive views, she is taken in by Wong's claim of facticity and objectivity, which only rarely reveal the deforming power of the father. It is exactly Ghymn's insensitivity to Wong's tentativeness in delineating her psychological injuries which makes her incredulous towards Wong's statement of having suffered repression, cruel punishment and restrictions on individual expression. See Ghymn, *Images of Asian American Women*, 48f.

⁵⁴⁴ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 103.

vast mounts of onions. . . ."⁵⁴⁶ Despite their friendship, there appears to remain a barrier between employer and employee, which instead of being examined is symbolized through the properties of the household. Her second employment with the Jeffersons is memorable because of its great physical demands which are only balanced by the satisfactory wage in this household.

When she feels that she is completely tied down by her household tasks and school, she changes over from her nonresidential full-time job to four part-time jobs. While during her first two jobs Wong claims to form a personal tie to her employers, her part-time jobs, which appear much more depersonalized, are characterized by features of social difference or asymmetry. Although Jade Snow affirms that she "really liked these odd jobs better, since all that was involved was serving party dinners and washing dishes, which was not so tiring as the entire management of a household,"⁵⁴⁷ she does not feel attracted to these better-off classes which have hitherto been unknown to her. Being especially interested in the different roles that men and women play in American families, Jade Snow is quite perceptive of organizational structures within these families. Her detachment from what she sees is manifest in her satirical classification of her employers into "the horsy family", "the apartment-house family", "the political couple" and "the bridge-playing group". The reasons for her satirical description, which obliquely reveals that this world offers her no real alternative to Chinese culture, are to be found in Jade Snow's primary experience of being treated as a "nonperson":

However, at this home, toward ten o'clock when everyone had had many cocktails, and the waiting dinner was turning to ruin in the oven, a group of men including the political star of honor, howling with laughter, would burst into the kitchen to get away from the women in the living room. Here they would start on their gleeful "Have you heard the latest one?" slap each other, and roar with gales of laughter over each tale. The small, lone female, Jade Snow, must have been to them merely another kitchen fixture for they never recognized her. Stoically she continued her work, trying not to blush at their remarks and double talk and to drive them out of her memory.⁵⁴⁸

Despite such distressing experiences, she avoids finding fault with this newly discovered world, because she somewhat paradoxically insists that her contacts

⁵⁴⁵ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 104.

⁵⁴⁶ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 104.

⁵⁴⁷ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 105.

⁵⁴⁸ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 106.

"broadened and humanized the American world. . . ." ⁵⁴⁹ Her feeling of being belittled by Chinese culture makes her search for a place where she is accepted as equal, but the episode quoted above makes her realize that her position in mainstream society is also far from her idea of justice and equality. Instead of being recognized as another woman whose presence should hinder the male guests from indulging in obscene stories, she is relegated the status of kitchen fittings.

Her decision to separate from her own family and to move in with the Kaiser family as live-in servant is grounded in Jade Snow's feeling of spiritual and material bondage. Motivated by her bitterness against her father who had turned down her request for financial support and precipitated by her sister's return from China with whom Jade Snow and Jade Precious now have to share their room, Jade Snow tries to enjoy her temporary freedom in white society. Unfortunately "the thrill of being able to close the door and be alone within four walls, in peace and quietness" is dampened by the tedious and tiring "work [which] never seemed to get done." ⁵⁵⁰ Evincing some of those qualities Jade Snow misses so much in her own family, the Kaisers lead a way of life for which she begins to strive. Yet, her admiration does preclude her from realizing the exploiting nature of her work. Forestalling Jade Snow's rebellion against the great amount of work she has to do, Mrs. Kaiser continually reminds Jade Snow of how "lucky" she is: "she was often reminded by her employer that not many 'school jobs' at that time offered twenty dollars per month in addition to room and board." ⁵⁵¹

Behind her facade of external content, Jade Snow questions her own ideas of education and work. She begins to see that her rebellion against Chinese expectations of women turns her also into an outsider in her American peer group. She puts forward arguments for her priorities just the same:

she had put aside an earlier Americanized dream of a husband, a home, a garden, a dog, and children, and there had grown in its place a desire for more schooling in preparation for a career of service to those less fortunate than herself. Boys put her down as a snob and bookworm. Well, let them. She was independent. . . . She had acquaintances, but no real friends who shared her interests. ⁵⁵²

Her defensive posture shows that she is not as secure about her purposes as she wishes to be. She feels that her staunch loyalty to the ideals of work and education

⁵⁴⁹ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 106.

⁵⁵⁰ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 113 and 114.

⁵⁵¹ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 113.

are hardly in agreement with normative ideas of femininity prevalent in both Chinese and American cultures. She tries to convince herself verbosely of the direction she is pursuing. In addition to her impression that in exclusive dedication to her education, life is passing her by, she has to learn that devotion is not necessarily followed by success. When her application for a scholarship from the university is rejected, she reacts frustratedly:

". . . I am so discouraged! I did so want to go to the university. I thought if I wanted the right things and tried hard, the right things would happen for me. I can never lift my head at home again if I have to admit to my parents that in my first independent resolution and endeavor, I've failed in what I sought. Perhaps I've figured things wrong, and I should give up now."⁵⁵³

Even though her unsuccessful struggle leads Wong to modify the direction of her aims and act according to the changed circumstances, her belief in the values of education and hard work does not really waver. Discerning the advantages of attending a local institution, she decides to go to the nearby San Francisco Junior College. This allows her, as before, to work during her spare time. As choices are constrained, she again ends up in a private household, where she is employed as a kitchen servant. She feels most humbled by the uniform she has to appear in, yet *Fifth Chinese Daughter* deals very cautiously with the contradiction of the narrator's own position as a servant without individual democratic rights. Her experience of subordination in this household is reinforced by her employer's aversion to "being disturbed when entertaining officials of her husband's company,"⁵⁵⁴ a disdainful attitude which overburdens Jade Snow with much extra work. Mrs. Simpson's contradictory demands on her domestic make it more difficult for Jade Snow to carry out her arduous tasks and responsibilities. After two years with the Simpsons, Wong claims that the family "wholly accepted her as part of their family household."⁵⁵⁵ However it is noteworthy that Jade Snow keeps calling the daughter *Miss Martha* and that Mrs. Simpson is able to force her reluctant servant into an appointment with the president of Mills College against her own wishes. Through these minutiae, the text exposes the limited extent of her integration and freedom.

With her entrance into Mills College instead of the state university, Jade Snow's career as domestic continues, because her scholarship only covers tuition. She is

⁵⁵² Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 133.

⁵⁵³ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 119.

⁵⁵⁴ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 124.

⁵⁵⁵ ⁵⁵⁵ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 147.

offered a position in the dean's household and in her office which gives her room and board in return for daily work. As the critic Elaine Kim notes, Wong "is grateful even to have parity with her employer's pets,"⁵⁵⁶ but her gratitude does not seduce Wong into discarding all those signs which contradict the school's motto of "democratic living in the truest sense."⁵⁵⁷ Indeed, the dean's autocratic attitude rarely lets her forget her status as an economically dependent student. Likewise various details of college life evoke much skepticism: she describes at some length that college's "kitchen staff was entirely Chinese, some of them descendants of the first Chinese kitchen help who worked for the founders of the college" and her own selected circle of friends points at a similar patterns of racial segregation:

There was Wan-Lien, a native of China, athletic, alert, direct, and intensely interested in chemistry. There was a granddaughter of Sun Yat-sen who had founded the Republic of China, sweet, friendly, and charmingly feminine. There was Betty Quon, a quiet, shy Chinese from Honolulu, a music major. Teruko, a Japanese girl from Tokyo, members of whose family were affiliated with the royalty of Japan; and [finally] Harriet, an American girl from the state of Washington who mingled with them as much as with her Caucasian friends.⁵⁵⁸

Her wish to integrate does not make her disregard the processes of ex- and inclusion that regulate the order of American society. What has been interpreted as Wong's most triumphant moments of assimilation by some critics actually is an assertion of cultural difference.⁵⁵⁹ These moments are two invitations where Jade Snow cooks an opulent, *traditional Chinese* dinner for different groups. The author's tendency to wipe out cultural difference is inextricably linked with the demonstration of being culturally different. Her success is only possible because in addition to her function as Chinese cook and servant, Jade Snow is permitted to play the role of the hostess. She enjoys a wonderful evening and is delighted to win attention and recognition, but her account implies that her success is precisely built on the higher social status the event confers on her.

After graduating from Mills College and before starting a full-time job, Wong experiences for the first time in her life a carefree existence without having to work or to study, but reality soon catches up with her. She expects that her college education

⁵⁵⁶ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 156.

⁵⁵⁷ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 157.

⁵⁵⁸ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 157.

⁵⁵⁹ See also Anne Goldman. "'I Yam What I Yam': Cooking, Culture, and Colonialism". *De/Colonizing the Subject: Politics and Gender in Women's Autobiographical Practice*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1992. 169-195.

will help her to find qualified work, and when the college placement office advises her to focus in her search for employment on Chinese firms, she is stunned.

She had been told that because she was Chinese, she could not go into equal competition with Caucasians. Her knowledge that racial prejudice existed had never interfered with her personal goals. She had, on the contrary, found that being Chinese had created a great deal of interest, and because of its cultural enrichment of her life she would not have traded her Chinese ancestry for any other.

No, this was one piece of information she was not going to follow, so opposed was it to her experience and belief. She was more determined to get a job with an American firm.⁵⁶⁰

Wong's logic appears cogent only to those readers who fail to decipher her covert text. Her general reticence from denouncing those experiences which endanger the vision of an American ideal has been misunderstood as an unshaken belief in American society. Her economic success, which was mainly due to World War II and its beneficial influence on the labor market, has reinforced this interpretation. Since the last quarter of Wong's autobiography is dedicated to showing her remarkable career as a secretary in the San Francisco shipyard and later as a self-employed potter in Chinatown, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* appears to sing the praise of American opportunities and chances.

According to her official aim to integrate as a Chinese American into white America, Wong does not tire of assuring the readers that "she had no reason to consider [her ancestry] a handicap."⁵⁶¹ Yet, her focus on race issues does not make her insensitive to the way work and education are related to sex roles and gender inequalities. From the beginning, her occupation as a secretary with the "War Production Drive" leaves Wong slightly dissatisfied, because "this position was a far cry from her imagined role of white-collar girl."⁵⁶² Although she receives promotions, toward the end of the war she understands "that as a secretary she could not always do the work she wanted. Neither could she hope for advancement except as secretary to a more and more important person."⁵⁶³ Once again, Wong keeps from exploring the implications of her experience immediately. Avoiding a confrontation with the patriarchal structures in dominant society and also with her intended readership, she does not straightforwardly challenge the limitations imposed on her but scrupulously repeats her superior's devastating advice: "If you want to make a

⁵⁶⁰ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 188f.

⁵⁶¹ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 195.

⁵⁶² Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 192.

decent salary or to be recognized for your own work, and not as somebody's secretary, get a job where you will not be discriminated against because you are a woman, a field in which your sex will not be considered before your ability."⁵⁶⁴ As a Chinese woman, Wong cannot help but notice the absence of job opportunities, even though she rarely does so explicitly and openly. Having not many options to reach her goal of self-actualization and assistance to Chinese people, she resolves to make use of her talents for writing and making pottery. In terms of money, Wong's business is quite successful, but she is also most conscious of remaining an oddity which is not to be taken too seriously:

Chinese and Americans acted as if they thought she were deaf or dumb or couldn't understand their language. She learned a very curious thing about humans: they would wonder, guess, speculate,⁵⁶⁵ but never question the person who could give them the direct answers.

The author's strategy to carve out her own niche by dodging competition against men is indeed exemplary and deserves admiration. Yet it is this pioneering spirit in addition to her guarded response to virulent prejudices which sometimes creates the impression of Wong's wholehearted embrace of white society's principles. Since she has experienced the fetters of Chinese sexism and has also sensed the boundaries that circumscribe class and gender roles in American society, Wong displays real ingenuity in ensuring success in two cultural systems which are at the same time cautiously criticized by her.

Owing to her insights, she is aware of the existence of systematic disadvantages for minorities and women, but she is also very proud of being able to lead an independent and self-determined life. However, her insistence on being an autonomous actor, who strives to gain control and self-respect through education and work rather than being a target of oppression, is only possible by acknowledged denials and unacknowledged ambiguities and silences. Rarely does she formulate direct criticisms of the gap between her experiences and dominant ideologies. Yet it would be entirely erroneous to conclude, as some critics have done, that only by putting aside her ethnic specificity and by trying to win her place in the larger, "liberating" society Wong does manage to solve her problems. On the contrary, regardless of her disapproval of Chinese patriarchy, large parts of Wong's characterization of the Chinese community indeed read like a humorous,

⁵⁶³ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 234.

⁵⁶⁴ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 234.

anthropological assessment. Her view of American society in turn communicates her sense of social domination. Wong proves both her Asian and her American identity, and the strategy of conveying dual messages about Chinese and American culture is most impressive. Her harsh criticism of Chinese traditions is balanced by affectionate portrayals, and to represent her relationship to America she resorts to a non-threatening simultaneity of covert political analysis and overt assimilation. Her deliberate interpretative silences are enforced by her politically motivated desire to mediate between two cultures. She attempts to solve the difficult task of highlighting the merits of each cultural system while interrogating her own perceptions of the world. Wong's autobiography is evidently conceived to serve her vocation of promoting cross-cultural understanding, but it does so in a context that is also the story of discomfort with sexist and racist structures in both cultural systems which obstruct the author's own Herculean path to material and mental independence.

6.4.2. Elizabeth West Wallace's *Scandal at Daybreak* (1954)

In the novel *Scandal at Daybreak*, the omniscient narrator focuses on the protagonist, the 32-year-old, fair-skinned beauty Helene Marlowe. The prologue begins by describing the contrasting sides of Spring City and thus rooting the plot between the affluence of Spring City's upper classes and the desolation of the lower classes. Helene, her husband Bart and their four children in fact belong to the poorest in town. Helene's desperation, which is equally based on her husband's alcoholism and their want of money, begins to dissolve when her husband is drafted into the Army at the outbreak of World War II. With the help of her doctor, Paul Dulane, with whom she begins an affair, Helene finds an office job at a local black newspaper. Her salary and her monthly allotment check enable her to make a down payment of a house in the black bourgeoisie area of Spring City. However when Bart returns, Helene finds it increasingly difficult to realize her dream of rising in society. Another affair, this time with a rich African American businessman, brings the solution: he endows Helene with money to open her own nightclub. While her divorce finally sets her free, Helene becomes the target both of Mafia-like business practices and of vicious rumors of her affair in the black community. The tension culminates

⁵⁶⁵ Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 245.

when Helene's married lover shoots her blackmailer. Helene becomes the true victim in the ensuing trial. As a result of the "scandal", her lover returns to his wife, her three minor children are placed in the custody of the welfare board, her oldest daughter leaves and her mother dies. Even though she has become a social outcast, her lawyer finally declares his love to her and offers Helene help in reestablishing a normal family life and in regaining custody of her children.

In foregrounding a black woman's endeavors to negotiate the economics of the urban slums, *Scandal at Daybreak* suggests different aspects that bear directly on the theme of the quest for social advancement. Firstly, the novel ponders on the question of to which degree African American women are free to choose between employment and housewifery. Secondly, the question of how work can operate as the key to economic and social liberation proves to be crucial for an author in a society where the politics of race, gender and class constantly demarcate the opportunities a black woman has. Thirdly, Wallace demonstrates the price her protagonist has to pay for her economic progress. Her growing obsession with work and material success winds up with the inability to identify the insanity and danger of her increasingly materialist thinking. It is apropos to view *Scandal at Daybreak* predominantly as a treatise on how the black woman's search for happiness fails because she proves unable to reconcile conflicting values and modify the exaggerated materialism in her life and conjunctively as a treatise on how the heroine is defeated. The novel also shows how its heroine attempts to avoid becoming the perpetual victim of different social determinisms and middle-class morality.

Helene and her husband Bart are a part of the large emigration movement from the South in the 1940s, lured to the northern Spring City by the promise of work and wealth. The newlyweds dream of prosperity and happiness, but they are soon caught in the clutches of urban poverty. In West Bottoms, the poorest neighborhood of Spring City, their middle-class ambitions shatter to pieces. The dilapidated and debilitating environment does not provide Helene the contentment of being a perfect homemaker, and Bart is unable to be the provider of the household:

Helene hated the house and the ugly old shacks that went unpainted year after year in the squalid neighborhood. Ten years before, when she had come as the bride of Bart Marlowe to the drab four-room house on Water Street, she had thought it would be such fun cleaning and scrubbing, making things shine with the light of their happiness.

Only until we can move to a better neighborhood Bart had promised. But, as the children came, first Claire, then Roger, Stephanie, and Laquel, Bart had turned more and more to liquor. The meager packing house salary, forever stretched to the breaking point, gradually took all the fun out of everything; and what had once seemed beautiful and fine gave way to hopelessness and despair.⁵⁶⁶

Their marriage breaks under the strain of unfavorable economic and social conditions. Bart fails to serve as the economic and emotional mainstay of their household, and he forfeits both Helene's love and respect.

Through the destruction of their marriage and Bart's loss of self-esteem, *Scandal at Daybreak* demonstrates the individual havoc methodically created by the hostile conditions in the black ghetto. But Helene does not yield to the harrowing circumstances in West Bottoms: she refuses to take employment because she does not want to leave her children alone after school. Fearing the corruption and the unwritten rules which govern West Bottoms even more than poverty, she wants to protect her children from the forces she is powerless to change. The dilemma that is generated by Helene's decision to stay at home and constant financial pressures add to Helene's and Bart's estrangement. Bart paradoxically resents both Helene's devotion to their children and her economic ambitions in the form of her wish to work.⁵⁶⁷

Helene increasingly regards her drinking husband as an immense impediment to her objectives, and she indulges, although with a nagging sense of guilt, in a feeling of happiness and delight when Bart is drafted. Instead of dreading the possible death of her husband, Helene eagerly anticipates a future without constantly feeling ashamed of Bart. In order to effect her purpose to get out of West Bottoms, she relies on her mother Mimi to care for her children while she works.

Thus Mimi becomes a necessary accomplice to Helene's upward mobility. She approves of her daughter's aspirations and encourages her plans insofar as she is a fervent believer in hard work herself: "Why you're beautiful, and you have everything to work with, . . ." she advises Helene. "Get you a good job and stick with it until you can do better. You're still young and, as I said awhile ago, this is your chance to try and salvage your life from the wreckage and mess it is now."⁵⁶⁸ Having been raped by her white employer at age sixteen and then driven away by his jealous wife, Mimi

⁵⁶⁶ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 2.

⁵⁶⁷ While Bart reproaches her with her refusal to contribute to the family budget, he at the same time asserts his satisfaction with their situation. Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 4.

has incurred even more caustic hardships than Helene in her struggle to support herself and her daughter. She represents the classic Southern African American woman worker, ironing and washing for white folks and trusting in God's provisions. Although she has absorbed the American work ethic, she pursues neither opulent life styles nor material objects. Apparently she is aware of the limits of the American Dream for black women. In contrast with Helene, she is content with her situation because she has secured her own small space and ensured her economic survival. Given their financial urgencies, Mimi understands that blacks frequently employ "indecent" strategies of which she strongly disapproves. Her daughter's immediate success looks suspicious to her: "I wonder how she did that in such a short time,' she mused. 'Lord, I hope my baby ain't took up with no gangsters or nothing.'"⁵⁶⁹ As a mother who has taught her daughter to be morally upright, she is naturally concerned with her daughter's ethics. Rather curiously she consistently refrains from asking her daughter about the source of the money Helene is spending. Mimi does not castigate her daughter because she prefers either undiluted ignorance or she internally accepts Helene's tactics.

From the beginning, Helene's aim of earning money exhibits some professional ambition: "I know there are warehouses and packing plants that need help, but I'd like to work across town in an office someplace. I suppose I sound silly in my position. Maybe I should take any kind of work I can get. . . ."⁵⁷⁰ She knows the cramped opportunities for black women and knows that the professional areas in which they can work are precisely circumscribed. Recognizing the male as the locus of power, she instantly utilizes her acquaintance with the educated Paul Dulane to find employment that corresponds to her abilities and in particular to her burning desire to get ahead. In a hierarchical society that is organized not only in terms of race and gender, but also in terms of class, the "right" work is for her one of the essential variables to achieve wealth and status. To Helene, her occupation as office help with the oldest black newspaper in Spring City, *The Register*, constitutes an amazing and even remunerative opportunity, which she wants to use to save money for a new start. But what appears at first as a door to liberation very soon turns out to be a social trap: her employer, who is morbidly envious of Helene's beauty, exerts immense psychological terror to prevent Helene's rise in her social position. The

⁵⁶⁸ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 26.

⁵⁶⁹ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 47.

⁵⁷⁰ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 24.

strenuous job on which her economic independence is built harms her emotionally, and she begins to hate "herself for needing work so desperately."⁵⁷¹ In the long run, Helene is unable to endure the severe pressure at her work place and she quits as soon as she can find an alternative.

She does not earn enough money in order to achieve upward mobility and to escape from stifling oppression. When Paul who becomes her lover and takes the liberty of giving her some money, she barely hesitates before accepting his assistance: "She felt a flush of shame at accepting money from him, but only for a moment. She consoled herself with the thought, 'Why shouldn't I, he's taking my time and he should know if he can afford it or not.'"⁵⁷² While her reckoning reveals that she is willing to exploit social structures which assign women the status of a saleable commodity, it also appears that Helene understands, perhaps unconsciously, the patriarchal system which privileges men and rarely enables women to be successful on their own.

From the moment Helene is introduced to the fashionable upper class district of Spring City, her dream of a new life for her family turns into the beginning of a mania:

A burning, intense desire for a familiar surroundings took possession of her being. An obsession to have her children brought up in such an environment was born at that moment. "I'll do it," she whispered fiercely. "Some way, somehow I'll stay right here at the register. I'll work my fingers to the bone. I'll do anything to move out of West Bottoms into this part of town." The desperate determination caused a cold and calculating gleam to shine from her eyes.⁵⁷³

To make her dream come true, Helene makes a down payment on her eagerly coveted house in "Quality Hill" and settles with her mother and children in the black, upper-middle-class environment. Here, the Marlowe family increasingly transforms into an apparent matrifocal "organization": Mimi is concerned with the emotional support of the family, while Helene works for the material survival of the family and tries "to wrestle from life a place in the sun for her children."⁵⁷⁴

Bart's return from the war after three years of absence hardly changes the matrifocal family structure, but his unchanged habits continue to overburden Helene with the care for the family: "Helene's days and nights were filled with work, worry, bills, and anxiety for the children. There was an endless repetition of sleep, meals,

⁵⁷¹ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 85.

⁵⁷² Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 40.

⁵⁷³ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 34.

⁵⁷⁴ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 101.

and the thousand joys and momentary sorrows of childhood."⁵⁷⁵ Although the overworked and nervous Helene realizes that Bart increasingly disrupts all her arrangements and endangers her reputation in the neighborhood, she puts up with him for a couple of years. She clings to her marriage vows, because divorce would make her an outcast in "Quality Hill" until her jealous husband beats her into unconsciousness one day. Slowly it dawns on her that the work ethic she has adopted from her mother do not equip her with the tools to negotiate her situation. More and more frequently, she begins to think about utilizing what she has been induced to see as her most valuable property - her beauty: "'Oh; Lord,' she whispered, 'you made me beautiful, why shouldn't I use it to my advantage. I hold the lives of five persons in my hands. Their welfare depends on me. I see only one way out.'"⁵⁷⁶

The wish to give her children a better chance than the one she had is the most important incentive to take the path she then chooses. She has always been highly aware of the relationship between education and poverty. She explains to Paul: "I want my son to grow up like you, educated, refined, having a sense of cultural value, a white-collar job, decent surroundings and associations as well as social prestige."⁵⁷⁷ Her focus on her son notwithstanding, she does not generally regard education as a male prerogative. Therefore, when her daughter graduates from high school, Helene is likewise fixated on Claire's college education. Helene has by now realized that her work and her salary are not sufficient to finance a university education and she returns to her notion of male power. When she meets "rich old Van Chinn", one of Spring City's most successful black entrepreneurs, and is invited by him to have a night out,

Helene's determination that Claire would go to college made her say to Irving Van Chinn when he called her that night, "Yes, I'll go for a drive with you." . . . When he smiled a melodious good night, he pressed a hundred dollar bill in her hand. She knew then that circumstances demanded that she see him again. . . . She saw him as a means whereby her beloved Claire could get to college and she should remain in the house on the "Hill". For the first time in her life she began to scheme and plan ways of holding a man. She wanted to keep his interest at all costs.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁵ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 67.

⁵⁷⁶ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 74f.

⁵⁷⁷ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 34.

⁵⁷⁸ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 96f.

Helene's goal is her daughter's education. But this passage also reveals the transformations Helene's objectives undergo. Her daughter's education is crucial, but she is not willing to subordinate other dreams and aims for Claire's education. Her original goals are increasingly supplemented or even replaced by other wishes.

With Irving's support and money, Helene creates a truly successful capitalistic business, the night club Bronze Pony. While the text leaves entirely open why the night club bears this name, its sexual connotation and the reference to the nature of Helene's and Irving's relationship is most obvious. Helene utilizes her most important resource, her beautiful body, but in doing so she also proves her acumen in aligning herself with the privileges of class and economic power.

In her emphasis on Helene's physicality, Wallace sometimes almost painstakingly attends to her heroine's physical beauty and the ways it works, but it is important to note that Helene is not simply a physical object. Disclosing how both men and women experience her beauty, Helene is not only framed through the male, but also through the female lens. Because the heroine consciously decides to rely on her body for the realization of her dreams, she partly resists thorough objectification.

This phase of great economic success in Helene's life gains momentum of which she is not aware. Until now, her existence has been dominated by the growing desire for upward mobility. Despite her experience of the limitations of the Puritan principles of hard work and morality, which have rarely served black women, her decisions and her direction in life have heavily relied on the values and beliefs of the class to which she wanted to gain access. Her relationship with Irving and her business domain show that she has not wholly swallowed the middle-class code of ethics but operates on the outskirts of bourgeois respectability. Helene's success, which does not come through channels generally thought to be middle-class, strains the community's sense of acceptable behavior. She makes this realization when she is denied membership to the "Intellectual Club": "I came from Water Street and I'm just not acceptable. Besides, I'm the bad woman on 'Struggler's' Hill."⁵⁷⁹ She has become one of the leading black businesswomen, but not a respected member of the privileged classes.

At the height of her career, Helene rejoices that "Claire was in college. She felt a deep satisfaction at realizing the greatest ambition of all."⁵⁸⁰ She affirms that all her

⁵⁷⁹ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 134.

⁵⁸⁰ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 108.

problems "faded into nothingness the day she saw Claire receive her diploma from the University. It was the supreme triumph of her life. The thing she had fought for, schemed for, risked everything decent and sacred for culminated into that one moment."⁵⁸¹ But at the same time, her primary frame of reference has increasingly become the materialism of the American Dream, her passion for property and status. As time goes by, there are moments when she begins to doubt her actions:

"What have I degenerated into?" she asked herself silently, "defying all the laws of decency and society. Running around with another woman's husband who wants me only because I'm young, healthy and pretty enough for him to show off when he feels disposed to do so. I'm just another article Van Chinn's money can buy."
Her mind raced on. She thought of Claire. "Claire, yes, that's why I'm doing it for Claire, Roger, Laquel, and Stephanie. I've got to give them a chance to live like this. To have things, cars, beautiful homes, summer places and to meet the right people so they can belong. This is the only way I had of doing it."⁵⁸²

She recalls the incentive for her economic struggle only with difficulty, because she has obviously lost sight of her original purposes. Her dream, which seems to have become rather independent, has assumed an exclusively materialistic hue. Her children's education is no longer her primary motivation. As an inhabitant of Spring City's best neighborhood, she absorbs the monetary orientation of her surroundings. Her strong will to emulate and imitate the life style of high society transforms her into a machine working relentlessly without much consideration for her own physical limits or the psychological needs of her children. While she drives herself nearly beyond the point of exhaustion, work brings the imperative material compensation.

Exerting a surprising degree of command over her life and over black men that women seldom have,⁵⁸³ why and in which ways does Helene fail in the end? For a long time, Helene manages to control the requests of two rivaling men who are central to her nightclub. On the one hand, there is Irving Van Chinn, on whom she has a good grip through her personality and appearance. On the other hand, there is the Italian businessman Tiger Derocca, who tries to blackmail her in order to gain power over and destroy his opponent Irving. However Derocca is led astray by her beautiful and seductive facade of cooperation. For several years, Helene uses both men, and is in turn used by them, until their *ménage á trois* escalates and Tiger is

⁵⁸¹ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 141.

⁵⁸² Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 112.

⁵⁸³ There are several voices by black men which express unlimited admiration for Helene's strategies. See Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 128 and 151.

killed in a scuffle by Irving. In losing control of the situation, Helene is caught between the rivalries of the two men. It is apparently the devastation of several lives, including her own, that finally makes her repent for her money-making schemes: "For the first time she wished with all her heart she had stayed on Water Street. 'Then our paths would not have crossed. I wouldn't have had the chance to hurt so many persons, and in the end ruin myself.'"⁵⁸⁴

The conclusion of *Scandal at Daybreak* is less stringent than it might seem at first glance. When Helene breaks down because her children have been taken away from her, she explains to her oldest daughter her deeper reasons:

"I did it for you, Roger, Laquel, Stephanie, and Mimi. I was determined that you should have a chance in life. I brought you from Water Street. I gave you that chance the only way I could. . . . I gave you the chance, Claire. You're not walking out of here ignorant, ragged, or broke. . . . It's an irony of fate that I end up losing all the things that I sold my very soul to cherish and keep."⁵⁸⁵

On the one hand, Helene keeps defending her actions. It is important to her that her daughter, who has become used to taking wealth and the opportunities it provided for granted, appreciates the extraordinary performance of the mother. Helene still defends her ambition and her methods of realizing it. But on the other hand, she realizes with regret that her enslavement to materialism leaves her with nothing that is really worthwhile in her life. She has exchanged her vivacious children for an empty house.

But Helene is not completely isolated in the end. Although she has definitely been expelled from the leisurely club of her highbrow women "friends", two men stand by her. Her former lover Paul declares his uncontested love and friendship as does Helene's lawyer. In addition those lower-class and hard-working women whose affection and loyalty have never been of great importance to Helene prove to be her true and only friends, supporting her and showing her the way to personal contentment. One example of these women is Pearl, her loyal, but perspicacious housemaid Pearl who has always been critical of the intensity of Helene's beliefs and maternal ambitions. While Helene discerns her overemphasis of material values and mourns the loss of her children, Pearl comments: "'Poor thing, it's a sin to love anything, shore as you born, like she loves them chillun.'"⁵⁸⁶ Thus, Pearl reinforces

⁵⁸⁴ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 159.

⁵⁸⁵ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 155.

⁵⁸⁶ Wallace, *Scandal at Daybreak*, 165.

the novel's detached presentation of the mother-child relationship. Pearl is also given the last word in the novel. She claims that Jeffrey Black's proposal to Helene is the solution to Helene's material and psychological problems.

To some extent, this proposal, which possibly implies the protagonist's retreat to domesticity, represents a form of capitulation because the author is obviously not able to work out a more credible solution to Helene's predicament. It seems more important that the ending, which is tellingly devoid of any romantic sentiment, indicates that the punishment Helene suffers for her defiance of conventional behavior is not long-lasting. Hence, at the novel's conclusion Helene's "bold" transgression of social conventions is not punished with her social and psychological destruction. Instead the ending suggests her recovery from despair and isolation and the beginning of a new phase in her life.

Wallace's *Scandal at Daybreak* does not affirm consistent values. Principally the failure of the protagonist and her frantic attempts to escape poverty denote the author's reprehension of Helene's addiction to the dysfunctional, "rags-to-riches" ideology. The novel reproves the distorted extent of Helene's dream of prosperity and also Helene's omnipresent maternal drive which makes her dangerously oblivious to all the perils lurking in her way. Yet, despite her faults, she is not only saved from having to return to West Bottoms, but is also offered the chance to rectify her mistakes. In a very prudent fashion, the text even expresses an understanding of Helene's actions by drawing attention to the lack of employment possibilities available to black women, which are predominantly unskilled service jobs in low-paid sectors.

6.4.3. Summary

Fifth Chinese Daughter as well as *Scandal at Daybreak* demonstrate the prevalence of the associated subjects of education and paid employment in the lives of minority women. Thus they help inject these issues more energetically into the discursive landscape. Those feelings of discontentment and frustration that both heroines spasmodically exhibit are anchored in the limitations they experience as women and as members of racial minorities in the context of these issues rather than in the constraints they experience in their domestic lives. Whether for economic or

ideological reasons, both texts do not envision a purely domestic idyll for their heroines. Instead they present other options open to women, however restricted they may be. These restrictions then become the leading theme of both texts as they unfold the power of social determinisms and the complicity of racial and sexual subordination. Both books concentrate on how the heroines Jade Snow and Helene come to understand that their gender as well as their racial heritage reduce their value on the labor market and that the way of minority women toward a self-defined, economically self-reliant life is fraught with societal obstacles and resistance.

Instead of applauding existing notions of “women’s proper place”, Wong and Wallace contrive two heroines who are raised according to a strict code of work and thrift and whose careers defy the idea that a woman’s sole task is to become a devoted housewife and mother. To a different degree in both texts, the image of women’s domestic roles is contrasted with an ethos of individual performance that reveres individual endeavors, nondomestic activities and public success. Because of economic forces, the female protagonists seek employment in the first place. Apart from financial reasons, employment contains a notable attraction for Jade Snow and Helene because they have learned to acknowledge participation in the labor force as a foundation of social advancement, influence and personal satisfaction.

Particularly Wallace’s protagonist in *Scandal at Daybreak* mirrors minority women’s long history of combining gainful employment with domestic obligations. Being largely the main breadwinner and sole parent at home, Wallace inscribes the position of an African American woman into the postwar discursive discussion of (white-defined) gender roles. The author does not question the principle of women’s responsibility for home and children; instead, her criticism is directed toward the obsessive form of her protagonist’s maternity. What the author never allows the reader to forget is that Helene’s ambitions have to be seen in the context of race, class and gender barriers. Her determined attempts to succeed for her children result from the experience of being a poor, black woman, whose chances are further impaired by her lack of education.

Both protagonists dream of a better, socially and economically less constricting life, and see an education which extends beyond high school, as the means to it. Adult education is an alternative not open to Helene, so she never considers an education of her own, but instead she devotes much of her attention to her children’s education. Both Helene and Jade Snow expect education to be the medium through

which they can avoid those menial occupations in which the preceding generation of women were concentrated. Jade Snow's professional achievements show the degree to which her hopes come true.

In contrast to Wallace's protagonist, Wong's heroine strikingly circumvents marriage in her narration and in her life, home and family. While her relative silence does not pose a blunt challenge to domestic ideals, it does imply an incongruence between her own yearnings and those voices which proclaim motherhood as the only truly fulfilling role for a woman. Inasmuch as Wong excludes the possibility of self-sacrificial motherhood and focuses instead on her heroine's independence, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* works out a barely discernible mode of opposition to those attempts which aim at confining women to child-rearing and household responsibilities and thereby excluding them from the labor market and possibly from white-collar employment. Far from being a radical non-conformist, the choices she makes still reflect that she is not particularly content with the life set out for Chinese American women by society and aspires to a life undefined by narrow social classifications. Thus it is of lesser significance that she joins those voices which assume family and career to be incompatible, but envisions a life model that allows a person to pursue different interests in different periods without social inhibitions.

Both novels point to the simultaneous existence of liberal and conservative attitudes regarding gender roles. Even more importantly, they reveal the ways in which both authors insert their particular perspective into the often conflicting currents on women's access to education and the labor market. The existence of multiple systems of subordination underlying their experiences infuse and construct the meaning and importance of these issues, which extends far beyond the theoretical discussion in the social sciences.

6.5. Claiming Ownership of the Past

The authors under discussion in this chapter, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca and Katherine Dunham, differ in their ethnic and, though to a lesser degree, in their social backgrounds. Cabeza de Baca was a descendent of the established, landed upper-class families in northern New Mexico and more educated than average working-class Nuevomexicanas. Yet, her works show that in spite of a genteel environment

her existence was also fraught with duties and sorrows which rarely provided enough space for writing.⁵⁸⁷ Similarly, Dunham, although born in Chicago as the daughter of a relatively successful black family, was not sheltered from the poor economic conditions that most African Americans suffered during that time. Dunham shares with Cabeza de Baca the privilege of having attended university, but both demonstrate through and in their texts their identity with and proximity to the majority of people of color.

Both authors and their writings have customarily been ignored by literary critics, which is perplexing, as some of their books have been republished in the 1980s and have thus been rescued from disappearing too soon and too easily⁵⁸⁸. There is a general interest in Dunham's internationally well-known dance, choreography, and anthropological research,⁵⁸⁹ which probably contributes to the fact that her memoir is in its third reprinting. *A Touch of Innocence* is still available because Dunham chose to clothe her experiences, reminiscences and visions in the autobiographical form in order to put them at the readership's disposal. Given the multiplying popularity of the autobiographical genre, Dunham's book is not only able to satisfy her fans' curiosity about her personal history, but also to contribute to a wider understanding of what it meant to be an African American female at the beginning of the century.

Apart from their formal and stylistic particularities, both these texts have in common an intense interest in the past of their people. In addition to the authors' obvious sense of the deficiencies of conventional portraits of the past, which their own books seem to counterbalance, the function that both textual representations fulfill for the postwar period is worth examining. Taking up the dominant culture's

⁵⁸⁷ Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert. *The Good Life. New Mexico Traditions and Food*. 1949. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982; Katherine Dunham. *A Touch of Innocence: Memoirs of Childhood*. 1959. Chicago, London: 1994. See also Raymond Paredes for a different interpretation of the socio-political background of early Mexican American women writers. "The Evolution of Chicano Literature". *Three American Literatures*. Ed. Houston Baker. New York: The Modern Language Association, 1982. 33-79.

⁵⁸⁸ Fabiola Cabeza de Baca. "Los Alimentos y Su Preparacion". *Extension Circular* 129 (April 1934): 4; *Historic Cookery*. 1949. Las Vegas: La Galería de los Artos, 1970; *We Fed Them Cactus*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954; Katherine Dunham. *Katherine Dunham's Journey to Accompong*. New York: H. Holt, 1946; *Island Possessed*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1969; *Kasamance: a Fantasy*. New York: Odarkai Books, 1974. The issues of a text's disappearance and reemergence lead once again to the topic of literary values and processes of canon formation. See also fn. 391.

⁵⁸⁹ Like Zora Neale Hurston, Dunham collected material on Haitian culture in the 1930s which in fact led to considerable rivalry between the two researchers. See Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. "An Island Occupied: The US marine Occupation of Haiti in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and Katherine Dunham's *An Island Possessed*". Eds. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Heike Raphael-Hernandez. *Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag, 2000. 153-168.

discourse on history, both books resort to specific strategies which comprise a particularly feminine voice and develop a perspective which recasts the past in an unequivocally personal and cultural context in order to represent the distaff side of American history.

6.5.1. Fabiola Cabeza de Baca's *The Good Life* (1949)

The classification of Fabiola Cabeza de Baca's nostalgic book poses some difficulties because it deals - as the subtitle "New Mexico Traditions and Food" already indicates - with customs as well as with cooking and nourishment. Cabeza de Baca's book collapses the lines between anthropology and cultural history. It is a two-part ethnographic cookbook, which crosses the genre boundaries of biography, autobiography, historiography and folklore and combines this composition with recipes of gastronomic delicacies. Thus, it is neither a straightforward fictional tale nor an ordinary recipe book, but a very clever ethno-historical mixture which elaborates the position the author and her community adopt towards the hegemonial claims of the larger white-dominant culture. Relying on recollections of a "food-oriented" past for images of integration, Cabeza de Baca's description of domestic economy implies on a more abstract level the recipe for the healthy continuance of the Hispano community.

With reference to Cabeza de Baca's rationale, the book both resonates with the desire to strengthen her own Hispano community and with the urge to provide the extracultural public with an example of the good life. Given her sense of responsibility to the Nuevomexicano community and her impulse to prove the text's authenticity, Cabeza de Baca connects the cultural locale of the book to her own life in her preface and thus inscribes her own experiences into *The Good Life*. Both the reference to her own personal development and her claim of its representativeness give the text a distinctly individual imprint. From that point of view, the text is both a collective tale and an autobiographical utterance. Vis-à-vis her double audiences, her experiences empower her to assume the position of a mediator between two cultures whose story constitutes a multiaddressed discourse. Her direct approach to her potential readership represents a most ingenious step because she induces her non-Hispanic readers to collaborate with her Hispanic readers on the process of

reproducing New Mexican culture by using the recipes. The equation the author establishes in the title between sustenance and the good life invokes food traditions as the signifier of the community's well-being. Through the rubric of nourishment, cooking and recipes, *The Good Life* provides a culinary metaphor which is basically feminine. It calls attention to women's achievements and reasserts the politically significant contribution of women's work to the social and cultural world⁵⁹⁰. Although the book sidesteps a candid political discourse⁵⁹¹, it operates - despite the deceptive neutrality of the title - on a dual plane because the author sets out her position against the dominance of Anglo-American culture and against patriarchal standards in general.

The fictional sequence of *The Good Life* centers on the daily way of life of the mythic Turrieta family, living and working in the isolated New Mexican village El Alamo where traditions, customs and rituals have survived and remained nearly unchanged over the decades and centuries. Chapter headings such as "The Herb Woman", "The Wedding" and "The Wake" connote the socially and culturally independent structures of the Hispanic community whereas "Autumn Harvest", "Winter's Plenty", "Christmas Festivities" and "Lent" reconstruct on the textual level the symbiosis of land, weather and people. Following the rhythm of nature from fall to spring, the text is not purely chronological in structure but unifies separate chapters through a circular movement.⁵⁹² The author succeeds in stressing the customary all-importance of nature for the country population as well as recreating the unique and distinct features which have characterized the Mexican American community in the past.

The life Cabeza de Baca nostalgically looks back on revolves around working for survival, which is in the text primarily equated with food, its production and conservation. The opening episode provides an appropriate image for the regenerative power of nutrition. After a long day of hard labor, the neighbors join the Turrietas to help them string red peppers. Before they finish at midnight, they gather in the kitchen. "The table with its clean flowered oil cloth was carefully laid for the

⁵⁹⁰ The term culinary metaphor is used by Anne Goldman in "I Yam What I Yam", particularly on page 191f.

⁵⁹¹ On this topic see Genaro Padilla. "Imprisoned Narrative? Or Lies, Secrets, and Silence in New Mexican Women's Autobiography". *Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*. Eds. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar. Durham. London: Duke University, 1991. 43-60.

guests and the Turrieta family. As they took their places for the repast they looked so tired, so worn and bent - young and old. The coffee, and the *buñuelos*, the freshly fried bread, seemed to put new life into them."⁵⁹³ Thus the introductory description of familial chili picking and communal chili drying not only indicates the immense productivity of the well-ordered community and describes the organization of the Hispanic village, but it also evokes also the centrality of reproductive labor for the subsistence of the community. As the area of nourishment and food preparation, which has rarely been dealt with in male writing, is assigned to the El Alamo women, Cabeza de Baca's choice of recording the ordinary work of mothers, grandmothers and daughters furnishes the text with a distinctly feminine imprint. In focus and also in tone, women's activities and expertise are acknowledged: "How skillfully the women went at their task of peeling chile without a pod being torn by their agile fingers."⁵⁹⁴ The author's conscious selection of descriptive adjectives such as "careful", "quick", "busy" or "beautiful" recovers women's duties in a gesture of gender pride. These gender-inflected attributes disclose that in performing their tasks the women achieve even more than is habitually exacted from them. Highlighting the preparation of Nuevomexicano cultural events - characteristically feminine labor - throughout the whole text, Cabeza de Baca locates Hispano ethnicity through the celebration of women's perfection in the cultural sphere.

The admiration that accompanies Cabeza de Baca's narration of ethnohistorical episodes reveals women's central position for the community's cultural sustenance and climaxes with the development of an alternative scale for female beauty which contradicts the social convention of identifying beauty with youth. While the son of the Turrietas, José, dislikes the idea that his beautiful fiancée Panchita might age like her mother, José's father offers a less ageist understanding of outer beauty which is based on industriousness and personal value:

Don Teodoro loved to watch his wife at work. . . . Her skin which had been pink like a rose petal was wrinkled and tanned. The blue of her eyes had not changed but was intensified by the darkness of her skin. Her hands were rough and wrinkled, yet they were lovely, because they had been useful.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² This circle is somewhat paradoxically filled with episodes contradicting the seasonal atmosphere. While in the beginning of *The Good Life* fall is associated with abundance instead of decay, the text concludes in springtime with the much-mourned death of the highly respected *curandera* of the village.

⁵⁹³ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 7.

⁵⁹⁴ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 9.

⁵⁹⁵ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 11f.

Insofar as Don Teodoro actively defines his wife's beauty apart from the cultural imperative of youthful blossoming, *The Good Life* might imply a feminist critique of conventional ideals of female corporeality. The novel dissociates beauty from youth and celebrates the vast space outside the ephemeral condition of youthful physicality through the figure of Doña Paula.

In spite of the humorous tone underlying this episode, the text obliquely invokes the theme of social transformation, along with the troubling issue of generational change and cultural loss. Here and elsewhere the differences in attitudes, life styles and expectations between different generations rise to the surface. While Cabeza de Baca's text already documents the conscious attempt to preserve the old ways and traditions, *The Good Life* clarifies that much of the necessary intergenerational exchange of cultural knowledge is possible through the work women do and the practices they hold dear.

One of the few concessions Doña Paula makes to changing attitudes, and here to female aging, is her consultation with a dentist in order to acquire a new set of teeth. Even though she retains her ideas of the dignity of aging and of the medical capacities of the local *curandera*, her comment that "We have to keep up with the times"⁵⁹⁶ communicates the deeply felt desideratum to balance vital traditions and needed progress. In a similar vein, when José presents Panchita with a ring, Doña Paula "would like to have given her the *memoria*, the intertwined puzzle ring which Don Teodoro had presented her at her betrothal, but it was old-fashioned and her children were of another age and generation."⁵⁹⁷ Doña Paula walks a difficult tightrope in accepting modern cultural practices without imperiling the community's ethnic specificity and identity.

In *The Good Life*, the political and cultural agenda of the text figures mainly in the stubborn *curandera* or medicine woman, whose competence and knowledge of herbs might spare Doña Paula the visit to the (most probably male and Anglo) dentist. Señora Martina's application of traditional ways of healing as well as her articulation of opposition to sociopolitical demands for assimilation turn her into one of the most important characters of the text, as the amount of narrative space expended on this protagonist alone suggests.

⁵⁹⁶ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 16.

⁵⁹⁷ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 32.

She mildly reproaches the villagers with having confidence only in presumptuous and inept doctors rather than in the medicinal properties of local herbs and plants. Way ahead of the rash practitioners of medicine of her time, she warns Doña Paula:

“If the doctor tells you your children have tonsillitis don’t let him cut the tonsils as everyone is doing; mix pulverized pennyroyal leaves with butter and rub the white spots in their throats. Take my word, they will not need a knife. It is even good for diphtheria [sic].”⁵⁹⁸

But Señora Martina senses that the community solely falls back on her knowledge when orthodox medicine has proven incapable of helping.

“Last year Doña Refugio, who does not believe in my remedies, swallowed her pride and came to me with your future daughter-in-law. Her flux had stopped for over two months and the doctor could not bring it on. I did. Each night for nine days, I made her sit on a hot bath of strong *yerba de la víbora*, snake brush, in which I had dropped nine round stones. On the ninth day, there it was. It was only a cold in her insides.”⁵⁹⁹

The *curandera*’s critique of the medical establishment can be understood as a critique of Anglo-American cultural and political hegemony, because what is at stake is the community’s cultural plenitude, its sociopolitical autarchy and, at worst, its entire existence. Without the old ways of healing, the villagers have to rely on and have to spend too much money on the, however ineffectual, medical care of the dominant Anglo society. The community not only becomes dependent on, but even has to pay for having lost its knowledge of the natural world in a most literal sense. Thus, Señora Martina’s catchy metaphor concludes that “. . . when I am gone my remedies go with me and the doctors *will get fat* from your generosity.”⁶⁰⁰ It is hardly coincidental that the culinary is used in a figurative way here. Rather, in line with the impulse that leads Cabeza de Baca to design *The Good Life* as a cooking- and recipe-book, the attention to eating and consumption customs gives Hispanic women ample scope to subvert Anglo-American hegemony.

The *curandera*’s policy of maintaining cultural traditions is not only grounded in the threat of amalgamation of Hispano into Anglo-American culture, but is additionally complicated by patriarchal structures within the community. In fact, men’s activities additionally endanger the survival of culturally specific customs and practices. Upon Doña Paula’s entreaty that “there are still more herbs you have not told me about in that neat pile there,” Señá Martina laments that “these are getting so scarce that I

⁵⁹⁸ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 15.

⁵⁹⁹ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 16.

⁶⁰⁰ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 18, my emphasis.

only brought you a few leaves; the men pull them up as weeds.”⁶⁰¹ In such a context, men appear as destroyers and women as protectors of Hispano culture.⁶⁰² If the text rearranges the power distribution between Anglos and Hispanos, it simultaneously touches on the relationship between men and women in the Hispano community and expresses a dual critique of major patterns in American society. Thus, the ethno-historical focus, which constructs a communal ethnic identity through the presentation of women’s activities and perspectives, is cleverly used to compensate for Hispanic women’s double domination.

Through the singular character of Señora Martina, *The Good Life* slightly opens her narrative to the social fragmentations of the past and alludes to the issue of class inequities and class relations. These issues had already been touched upon in the first chapter of the book by the introduction of the goat herder Tilano. The way Tilano and Señora Martina are addressed by the villagers points at their social rank: the lack of the honorary title “Don” and the verbal mutilation of “Señora” suggest that the Hispano community does not integrate all participants equally. Being servants to the more wealthy community members, both Tilano and Señá Martina are representatives of the non-owning classes, but they devise different strategies to make up for and cope with their situation. Tilano thus turns to a religious sect, which promises that his low-paid goat herding for Don Teodoro will soon be a thing of the past, whereas the slave-born Señora Martina has developed a psychologically liberating sense of mental freedom. Symptomatically, the *curandera*’s status outside the confines of society is not only based on her working-class affiliation but also on her ethnic origin. The presentation of Señora Martina as an Indian woman whose capacities are vital for the self-definition and survival of the community may be read as a critical move on Cabeza de Baca’s part. She touches on those quasi-racist structures within the community according to which such a member is assigned a marginal position in the social hierarchy on the grounds of her racial heritage.

If Cabeza de Baca appears to encourage resistance against capitalism, the author, remarkably enough, does not envision the solution to class conflicts at the expense of social harmony. Tilano’s and Señá Martina’s antagonism toward the capitalistic ordering of society and its ideological substantiation is counterbalanced

⁶⁰¹ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 17.

⁶⁰² Tey Diana Rebolledo. “Tradition and Mythology: Signatures of Landscape in Chicana Literature”. *The Desert Is No Lady. Southwestern Landscapes in Women’s Writing and Art*. Eds. Vera Norwood and Janice Monk. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987.105.

by the vital role they play for the cultural survival and self-sufficiency of the community. The narrative demonstrates that particularly the herb woman's cultural knowledge and skills provide her with some authority over those occupying the higher social strata. The musician and story teller Tilano is graciously conceded the privilege of cultivating his frequently irritating beliefs and eccentricities.

The ending of Cabeza de Baca's series of romanticizing vignettes of Nuevomexicano people and history carries symbolic weight. Señá Martina, one of the last representatives of genuine Native American tradition and independence, dies and leaves Doña Paula "wishing she had done more for her [Seña Martina] while she lived."⁶⁰³ Despite her sense of loss, Doña Paula is fully cognizant that now she is the keeper of secret recipes and formulas which need to be written down before they are entirely lost. The *curandera* has already warned her: "Doña Paula, why don't you put down all the prescriptions that I give you each year? You who can write need not rely on your memory only, as I have for years. I cannot live forever and when I am gone you will have no one to ask."⁶⁰⁴ Through *The Good Life* this request to remember and restore ancient knowledge against erasure and disappearance is translated into action. Thus, in order to incorporate as much of the endangered knowledge as possible into the literary genre, the book contains detailed practical information and complements the songs, sayings, medical recipes and prayers in the first part with the collection of New Mexican cookery in the second part. "In [this] sense, then", the critic Anne Goldman correctly observes in a footnote "the author herself takes on the work of *curandera* . . ."⁶⁰⁵ and transforms her own text into a repository of past learning. But instead of being a simple and inoffensive compilation of stories and recipes, the complex form of cultural and self representation expresses a counterhegemonic, literary maneuver intended to secure cultural survival.

In the context of cultural appropriation and cultural perseverance, the text obviously contextualizes resistance in an explicitly feminine manner. Both the text's demonstration of the integrity of New Mexican culture and its acknowledgment of the existential debts the community owes the common labors of women suggests how intimately lived cultural experience is related to the work of female predecessors.

⁶⁰³ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 42.

⁶⁰⁴ Cabeza de Baca, *The Good Life*, 14.

⁶⁰⁵ Goldman, "I Yam What I Yam", 195, fn. 26. See also Tey Diana Rebolledo. "Narrative Strategies of Resistance in Hispana Writing". *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 20.2 (Spring 1990): 144.

The community's cultural self-reliance, which is built upon female industry and inventiveness, assures the continuance of its autarchy. With its emphasis on cultural practices and values, the cookbook operates as a gender-conscious means of affirmation and a symbol of difference of restoring the peacefulness and harmony of a prior world by reviving the heritage of the past to find a regenerating formula for the present and the future. Cabeza de Baca demonstrates in her book that producing medical and culinary recipes means reproducing cultural practices and maintaining cultural specificity under the rubric of women's domestic labors.

6.5.2. Katherine Dunham. *A Touch of Innocence: Memoirs of Childhood* (1959)

The juxtaposition of the subtitle of Katherine Dunham's book *A Touch of Innocence* and her opening note to the reader marks a curious contrast at first sight: on the one hand, the author declares that the book contains *Memoirs of Childhood*, while on the other hand the author declares that this "book is not an autobiography."⁶⁰⁶ This paradox dissolves by way of bibliographical research. The first edition came out without a subtitle in 1959, but *Memoirs of Childhood* was added on the occasion of the book's republication in 1994. Originally Dunham did not identify her book as an autobiography. Whether with or without the author's consent, the book's classification as a memoir is not as antagonistic to Dunham's anti-autobiographical claim as it may seem. A generally accepted reading is that autobiographies frequently deal with inner, singular experiences, while memoirs are more concerned with outer events. Thus, the moment when an autobiographer has developed an adequate sense of self in order to play a specific role in society, autobiography turns into memoir. It is possibly the ensuing contrast between social role and identity which induces Dunham to deny her text the status of autobiography because she is more concerned with social role than with identity. However artificial the boundary between autobiography proper and memoir might be, the difference between these two literary genres can be significant.⁶⁰⁷ Dunham's own explanation points into the same direction, which helps to further understanding of her concern. She says:

⁶⁰⁶ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, n.p.

⁶⁰⁷ Dunham rejects the category "autobiography" but not "memoir", probably because her publishers are responsible for the book's later categorization. Indeed, it seems implausible to force Dunham's book into narrow genre categories. For instance, in contrast to many memoirs, which, as George

It is the story of a world that has vanished, as it was for one child who grew up in it - the Middle West through the boom years after the First World War, and in the early years of the Depression. And it is the story of a family that I knew very well, and especially of a girl and a young woman whom I rediscovered while writing about the members of this family. Perhaps from their confused lives may come something that will serve as guidance for someone else, or something that will at least hold attention for a while as a story.⁶⁰⁸

Obviously in no intimate sense does Dunham write about herself. With distanced objectivity, she recalls how patriarchal structures, economic constraints and personal circumstances interact in an unholy alliance and succeed in dehumanizing people and precluding happiness and self-actualization. Dunham's definition of her memoirs as an enthralling story, that is as fiction, reflects the curious issue whether the text's protagonist is identical with the flesh-and-blood Katherine Dunham. The author's strategic choice of third-person narration, her detached tone and her scrupulously accentuated lack of identification with "the girl" disclose that the story is obviously not intended as her own, but as the history of her people and as the depiction of a former world. Distancing herself from the text's subject by suppressing the authorial "I" and by calling herself "the girl" instead, the author works to consolidate her own position as actor in and witness to history, not merely as autobiographer.⁶⁰⁹ The use of the third person buttresses the book's movement from self outward into society and creates a range of concern that is larger than the standard autobiographical goals of confession or introspection. The book presents a peculiarly black and female perspective on history and explores the specifics of sexual power relations.

Consequently, rather than autobiographical in the conventional way, Dunham's purposes seem to be experimentally historical and didactic both for her own and her readers' benefit. Dunham's point in the passage cited above is that her book is less devoted to the emotional consciousness of the writer or the construction of the writer's self, which is characteristic of the autobiographical genre. In its orientation toward a historical field of reference, the book aims at recalling and restoring the past

Gusdorf has correctly observed, originate regularly in the writer's need for personal justification and gratification, Dunham's chronicle is a peculiar hybrid of personal narrative, family, community and sociocultural history which cannot be tied down to one single impetus. See George Gusdorf. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography". *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. 28-48.

⁶⁰⁸ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, n.p.

⁶⁰⁹ Yet, the heroine's proper name, Katherine Dunham, shows that she is not merely a fictive witness. The author's double-edged strategy of using both a third-person narrator and her own name for her protagonist establishes an internal distancing, while it serves to authenticate her own discourse at the same time.

in everyday life. This past is familiar to many of that generation but is now unknown and unrecorded. It also aims to provide a perspective that is otherwise threatened with being irretrievably lost.

Since Dunham after all insists that her book is also a memoir, the distancing and detachment she strives for is an effort not easily maintained. The storyteller does not renounce the book's categorization as memoir because it serves to assert her own veracity and that of her tale as well as to authenticate her childhood experiences. Textualizing her memories within an exemplary autobiography, she presents this portion of her life as a representative and as a symbolic expression of the past. In this sense, her sensitive, yet depersonalized, memoir demarcates the attempt to uncover some of the constituents of black life in the immediate past and their meaning for men and women alike because what has been published as American historiography has in fact been incapable to capture the matrix of (African) American life.

As Katherine's birth mother dies when the girl is not yet four, and her father Albert Dunham, forever emotionally injured, leaves his son and daughter for several years in the care of this unmarried sister in the City.⁶¹⁰ There, the girl's encounter with financial problems, urban terror and inappropriate daycare ends up in court and her father's custody is provisionally withdrawn until he remarries. Then, with the aid of his new wife, Katherine's ambitious father establishes a labor-intensive dry-cleaning and dying business in the Town near the City. This business increasingly consumes the already disturbed relationship between the despotic father and his family. After her parents' marriage disintegrates after years of hostility, the children also break off the relationship with their father for good. While the girl's renunciation from her father at the age of 18 ends one cheerless portion of her childhood, her new job at the heretofore segregated, exclusive public library in the City as the first college-educated black woman demarcates the beginning of another problem-laden phase in her life.

If the combination of "childhood" and "innocence" in the title arouses expectations of an Edenic plane of experience grounded in the peaceful, carefree and

⁶¹⁰ Although Dunham describes rural and urban topography in detail, she avoids specifying the setting of her childhood in order to underline the representativeness of her experiences. Nevertheless, there is some evidence for the assumption that the unnamed City is synonymous with the city center of Chicago. The Town is one of its 75, village-like neighborhood-towns, probably the Near West Side, which was once inhabited by working-class Germans and Irish and now is one of ten most impoverished communities of Chicago.

uncontaminated configuration of the past, Dunham's narrative from its very outset recreates a sordid childhood that is in complete antithesis to the title's connotation of paradise. Usually a reminder of the Edenic myth, the title's evocation of innocence effectively contrasts with the harsh reality Dunham records. Narrated with naturalistic simplicity and a minimum of comment, the first pages set the restrained, dispassionate tone which by contrast amplifies the description of the dreary, oppressive atmosphere and of the girl's ever present feeling of being wholly excluded from paradise. Despite a few moments of happiness, she is for a long time convinced that from early on her life is doomed, "troubled, overcast, full of presentiments of all that had happened thus far and of much more to happen in a great, mysterious unfolding."⁶¹¹ As the text charts Katherine's movement from childhood to adolescence, fear increasingly makes the child's life a perpetual torment. This fear does not have its source in the larger environment, but seems to issue from the very core of her own family. What Dunham's story demonstrates is how the "touch of innocence", normally a temporary feature of childish conceptualization, is programmatically retained and transformed by the maturing girl into a strategy of survival. It is a mentally protective veil to lessen the massed power of racist and sexist patterns in society and to make her experiences of personal and structural violence endurable.⁶¹²

One passage opens by describing the time the six- or seven-year-old girl spends waiting on a bitterly cold winter day while her father and brother are chasing rabbits for the family's dinner. This saga of violence, emotional cold and poverty opens hesitantly, but steadily reveals a life within a troubling context of open male aggression. These images refute the sentimentality the book title implies. Making use of Freudian imagery, the opening chapter "The Rabbit Hunt" reveals the girl's sensitivity to broader gender patterns of dominance and subjugation and traces her complex reaction to a growing awareness of the biological and cultural differences between the sexes. She disapproves of those characteristics she has come to understand as endemic to the female sex, but she equally rejects those patriarchal values her father represents. Thus, on the one hand she finds it hard to accept the

⁶¹¹ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 293.

⁶¹² The term "personal and structural violence" is borrowed from the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung. According to his definition, violence can be seen as a force which prevents human beings from realizing their full potential. His introduction of the categories of structural, unintentional and latent violence clarifies that violence can take many more forms than physical abuse as it is

idea of belonging to the “weaker sex”: as she resents having to squat in the icy cold while urinating, she prefers to wet her underwear; as she believes helplessness and anxiety to be typical of a girl, she rather unsuccessfully tries to exhibit courage and bravery. On the other hand, the girl detests the father’s lust and satisfaction at the end of the hunt and instinctively relates his passion for weaponry and physical conquest to his maleness:

. . . the idea of killing was distasteful to her; and the sight of the victim stopped in panic flight by rifle or shotgun - splattering the white snow with red dots, perhaps not giving up immediately or still trying to hop or contort out of pain to safety - brought revolt and repugnance; and some vague element of the abomination became transferred to the doers of the deed. Not to her brother so much: there was no violence in his nature, and no fear was conjured up at the sight of blood that he had let, because he seemed to have killed impersonally, as an expected duty. Her father’s smile of satisfaction and the bloody burden he carried, however, gave her a squeamish sensation, which she felt should be associated with him but could not understand.⁶¹³

Katherine gives vent to her puzzling feeling of personal defeat and of repulsion to paternal violence (here in a literal and a figurative sense) in a violent outburst. She fires her gun at a knot of hibernating snakes, “discharging all of her loathing at the noxious bundle. . . .”⁶¹⁴ Interpreted in Freudian terms, Katherine seeks to compensate for her frustration with her own impotence and with the menace that emanates from her father by shooting the snakes. Her reliance on the tools of the phallogocentric system - the gun - to destroy the disturbing phallic symbol - the snakes - points at the conflicting relationship between ideology and experience which becomes most evident in the internal predicaments of her father and stepmother.

Katherine’s recollection of the rabbit hunt some ten years later when she almost falls victim to her father’s attempt to “seduce” her, reinforces the sexual substratum of this episode. The father’s insistence on following a doctor’s recommendation to massage a slowly healing wound below his daughter’s knee reveals his desires to Katherine, who feels entrapped and almost hypnotized by the father’s manipulating hands and his phallic power. But

[a]s she swung dizzily on the edge of an abyss, an image saved her. The image of the rabbit at the end of a Sunday hunting trip years before. A rabbit hanging limp and blood-spattered. Slate sky, white snow, a child

popularly understood. Johan Galtung. *Strukturelle Gewalt: Beiträge zur Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1975. 1-36. See also fn. 638.

⁶¹³ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 8.

⁶¹⁴ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 9.

waiting for a man and a boy to return across ice-bound fields with the kill. A child shrinking from flannel underwear moist with urine, wiping a nose raw from dripping on the back of a woolen mitten . . . stinging eyes holding back tears of defeat . . . helplessness in the bitter cold . . . long ride home. Then the kitchen, and her father's hand forcing its way into the rabbit enlarged anal opening, emerging with viscera bulging between blood-shining fingers; again and again, the same hand that lifted the twenty-pound iron, the same efficient fingers caressing guitar strings, the same fingers massaging, intruding, insinuating toward secret places still scarcely known to her. Nausea drew her violently from the brink of some terror that she defied to take form. Blindly, with deep breaths, she fought her way back to safety. . . .⁶¹⁵

Despite her longing for affiliation and security, the lonely girl perceives that her father's massaging hands are not performing an act of love, but an act of physical offense. At an irrational level, she can sense that her father is transgressing physical boundaries by force. It is the brutal memory of the killed rabbit that enables Katherine to struggle against her impression of being totally at her father's mercy, of hopelessness and powerlessness. Although the destiny of the rabbit - hunted, killed, gutted⁶¹⁶ - fills her with extreme disgust, it reminds her of the violent physicality of her father. The memory succeeds in mobilizing her instinct for self-preservation and thus prevents her from becoming the incest victim of her father.

Up to that incident, the girl has often had the feeling that her father's accumulating attentions have something "smudgy" and "unclean", but she has never understood the logic of this impression⁶¹⁷. Similarly, she could not grasp the meaning of her father's conjugal infidelity. Katherine is able to finally notice in her father's actions the tension of unrelieved sexual desire, despite her essentially naive outlook. Two unrelated occurrences have come as a terrible blow to her: her father's advances toward his adolescent niece-in-law and her encounter with a homeless exhibitionist. Even though the niece's accusation of sexual harassment contributes to the shattering Katherine's shield of sexual innocence or dumbness as the niece calls it, her first reaction is: "I don't believe it. He *wouldn't*. . . . How *could* he? You're a *relative!*"⁶¹⁸ Ultimately, a written note proving the veracity of the girl's reproaches signifies the beginning of Katherine's disillusionment.

⁶¹⁵ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 283f.

⁶¹⁶ The sexual connotation of Katherine's memories, that is the bleeding of the rabbit and the father's role in the process of dressing it, indicate that the rabbit hunt assumes such an importance because Katherine identifies with the animal.

⁶¹⁷ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 266.

⁶¹⁸ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 248.

This night she marked as a turning point in her life, a matriculation from the faltering, fumbling accidental knowledges of childhood, from naïveté and wonderment and straining to decipher in the dark, and asking favors of stars, and hoping for a house warm in winter with concealed sources of heating, and yearning for tender love, and looking forward to never feeling shame or fear - a matriculation from juvenile optimism.⁶¹⁹

With a shock, Katherine has to realize that kinship does not preclude the awakening of the father's desire. Until her encounter with the tramp, she has had only vague ideas of what "mounting desire" means, but as the tramp forces her to witness his act of masturbation, she loses much of her innocence⁶²⁰. These experiences enable Katherine to recognize the sexual component of her father's intensifying advances to his teenage daughter.

By focussing on the same hunting episode at the beginning and at the ending, Dunham's retrospective is structurally embraced by instances of men's violence. Correspondingly, there emerges a pattern within the microcosm of the family, which is far too insistent to be attributed merely to chance and which is, of course, not without effect on the girl's psyche.⁶²¹ Although Alfred Dunham and Annette Poindexter have married primarily out of rational reasons, both anticipate some human warmth and affection. Failing to live up to each other's expectations, both partners experience deep dissatisfaction, both are disappointed and react - though in different ways - with aggression. Their discontent surfaces as a general argument between husband and wife, which grows in stages from certain areas of continuous disagreement. The destructive climate that poisons the marriage and destroys any affection the children had for the father, is intimately connected to cultural notions of how power and resources are distributed by gender. While Alfred Dunham "appreciated his second wife as helpmate and as foster mother to his children, he nevertheless had begun to chafe at her intrusions into his running of the business. ..."⁶²² The father, who acts according to unstated cultural assumptions which grant the male the right to have the final authority in the family, decidedly rejects his wife's wish to participate in decision making. He has the impression that his supremacy is at stake. When Annette Dunham accuses her husband of not providing properly for

⁶¹⁹ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 255f.

⁶²⁰ Thus, one might call Katherine a victim of mental rape. It is not the body, but the mind which is violated.

⁶²¹ As Katherine believes herself responsible for what she is going through because of some sin she has committed. These thoughts reveal how deeply distressed she already is. See for instance page 152.

⁶²² Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 89.

his family, he responds with violence to cope with his feelings of insecurity, inadequacy and inferiority. Thus, the parents are locked in a bitter struggle for power. Apparently fighting one final rearguard action of patriarchy, Alfred Dunham pursues different strategies to maintain control over his wife and children. He uses fear, intimidation and battering as a technique to keep his family in line. Intensified by a low impulse control, any infinitesimal, trivial incident is prone to enrage him, because he assumes it demonstrates a general challenge to his authority and control. To compensate for his damaged self-regard and to strengthen his position of power, he purchases a highly aggressive watchdog, demonstratively attending to it and caring more for it than for his own family.

Although the text does not explicate in detail why the schoolteacher Annette Poindexter has decided to marry a widower with two children, the references to her age and looks suggest that her consent to the marriage was partly dictated by panic. She obviously belongs to a generation of women whose own life plan encompasses husband and children rather than nondomestic achievements. In contrast to her acceptance of customary expectations, her sporadic predictions for her stepdaughter's professional future reveal an approval of women's employment in principle. However it is an approval that is highly ambivalent, intersecting with assumptions about social progress and respectable femininity, class and gender. For instance, she nurtures the hope that her daughter may become a doctor, but decidedly disapproves of Katherine's childish wish to become an explorer of the African continent: "This dream the mother refused to take seriously, as no 'respectable' young lady could conceivably find herself in such outlandish situations."⁶²³ The mother's own inconspicuous style of dress and her rejection of anything glamorous and exotic not only hint at a mostly traditional understanding of the female role, but also at the degree to which she wishes to distinguish herself from the lower class of the black community.

Annette Dunham is a slightly snobbish, emotionally restrained woman, whose ultimate dreams of proper housing and having a family reflect the ethos of a rather conservative (black) middle-class. The separation from her own family and her determination to achieve a middle-class lifestyle propels her into a socially isolated position. *A Touch of Innocence* suggests that the absence of black communal connectedness and social control makes her more vulnerable to her husband's

⁶²³ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 98

assaults. She is obviously on her own to negotiate the economics of a racist and sexist society.

Because of her social aspirations, she supports the father's nearly pathological ambition to establish his own business and shoulders the triple burden of household, family and business responsibilities. Her say in financial matters is not only grounded in her continuous labor, which becomes indispensable to family and business, but also in her legal partnership. As a consequence, Alfred Dunham depends on his wife's consent for any business transaction. The couple's battle for power is again and again sparked off by their tremendously differing views on risky investments. While the wife is intent on securing their property, the husband becomes obsessed with the idea of increasing it.

Altogether the emotionally unsatisfactory marriage is aggravated by different aims, by economic strains and Alfred Dunham's violent, intolerant temper. Still sticking to her ideals of being a "good mother, upright wife [and being] essentially moral in all of the ways set out by her Puritan forebears,"⁶²⁴ Annette Dunham seems determined to endure the exploitation, battering and abuse and to keep the family together beyond all reason. Since family values assume priority in her thinking, she is completely stunned when the children take sides with her mother against the father, and even in the face of mortal danger, she tries to convince the children of the importance of family bonds:

Forgetting all of a sudden what had gone before and why the boy had come from his dining room in his wrinkled gray-and-blue-striped pajamas, pointing the rifle at his father, his face ash-colored and with dark circles under his eyes because he couldn't possibly sleep enough with so much hate and unrest all around - Annette Dunham tried ineffectually to shield her husband. . . . reacting in the only way she could, it seemed to the girl illogical after the soul-sickening cries for help and the obvious brutality of her mistreatment. After having dragged the boy into it by calling for him, she kept saying over and over in the tone of voice that she always used when things happened that could never happen to her, "Albert, Albert, he's your *father!*"⁶²⁵

For her, one's family, particularly one's blood relatives, always comes first. She rejects her daughter's proposal to leave the Town with the argument of family loyalties, namely that her mother and her sister live nearby, that her brother is buried at a local cemetery and, on top of all, that Katherine's father is living there. The feud

⁶²⁴ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 213.

⁶²⁵ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 203.

between father and son is particularly tiring because it entails a conflict of interest for her. She disapproves of Alfred Dunham's maltreatment of his son, but she is also indignant at the son's positive rejection of inheritance, descent, family obligations and responsibilities.

Although Annette Dunham often shows courage and determination, she is in a disadvantageous position in conflict situations with her husband. As language completely fails as a medium of negotiation and self-defense, the conflicts with her husband usually result in physical violence. Thus, she learns to avoid open quarrels as much as possible, to put up more passive than active resistance to her husband's rivalry-laden self-affirmation, and to realize her aims with an entire set of oblique defense mechanisms like constant nagging and complaining. As the daughter repudiates the notion that violence is basically one-sided, she does not deem Annette Dunham simply a victim of domestic violence. Partly blaming the mother for the mistreatment she is suffering, the daughter holds both mother and father responsible for it. Katherine suggests that her parents are tied together in a symbiotic, dynamic relationship, which frequently feeds on violence.

Katherine's mother does not act out her frustrations and negative feelings as directly as her husband does. Instead she develops a concealed, suppressed form of aggression commonly resulting from a gender-specific socialization. Instead of obtaining a divorce as soon as possible, she remains with her husband, sacrifices herself and later expects "recognition of her self-appointed position as martyr."⁶²⁶ This choice reveals a harmful, inward-directed type of aggression. In this context, the weekly fainting and the subsequent leg cramps from which she is increasingly suffering, are evidently psychosomatic in origin⁶²⁷. Her illness originates in her stupendous, permanent effort to function perfectly, to play a part in a drama which requires loyalty, self-denial and ignorance, and her body represents the stage in the theater of oppression. While she endeavors to come to terms with her role, her body causes the arduously maintained façade to crumble: ". . . her hair in disorder, her eyes wild and rolling, and the corners of her mouth wetter than they should be."⁶²⁸ It is her body which protests openly against the hopelessness of her situation and against the constant psychological and physical stress. Her unconsciousness and

⁶²⁶ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 87.

⁶²⁷ The focus on the context and the symptoms of Annette Dunham's illness surprisingly reveals numerous parallels with the mass phenomenon of hysteria, the classic female malady in the second half of the nineteenth century.

her cramps literally embody the existential accusations of overwork, strain and abuse her body brings against her husband and provide her with a time out from the burden of her role.⁶²⁹

In the course of time, Annette Dunham's dual struggle for social advancement as well as for her husband's respect turns into a circle of separation and reconciliation. She leaves home, but a few indications of reform from her husband, her concern for the children, and complete destitution prompt her to return home. When the mother leaves the family for the first time, the girl is truly shocked because she feels entirely unprotected against the father's maltreatment. As she grows older, Katherine appears more indifferent to the war between her parents, which originates from a sexist culture, psychological insecurity and economic pressure.

Due to her realization that her parents share the same fabric of values and to her increasing involvement with her own situation, the focus of the book finally changes. The emphasis of the book shifts from Annette and Alfred Dunham to their daughter because *A Touch of Innocence* is ostensibly the story of Katherine's maturation, a growth which is increasingly in opposition to the parents' way of living. The development of their marriage begins to pale into insignificance beside her attempt at emancipation.

Clearly, those personal ingredients that contribute to the familial disaster - her father's tyrannical regime and her mother's striving for social prestige - serve as the narrative's primary concern. Dunham introduces her family in its specificity, but also presents it in its context, which is that of a particular African American family struggling against a hostile environment. Thus, her story also explores how individual, social and economic conditions interlock in significant patterns that determine life, values and survival and suggests that dominant structures in society methodically fragment her own family. Dunham's text gives some indications throughout that her parents' attitude and behavior are to varying degrees responses to the distorting, terrifying restrictions of society, adaptations they have created to preserve their personal integrity in an alien world. Central to this adaptation on the father's part is that the maxim he resorts to in his struggle to survive - to have some control over the elements that affect his life - gain dangerous momentum. He fails to

⁶²⁸ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 212.

⁶²⁹ The German language discloses an etymological affinity between the terms "Macht" ("power") and "Ohnmacht" (fainting, literally "without power" or "disempowered") and sustains the interpretation of Annette Dunham's fainting as non-verbal or bodily expression of her subjected position.

differentiate between “justified” self-defense and unwarranted violence. Those socially sanctioned, personal resources he mobilizes to achieve respect and recognition in an oppressive, racist system such as his self-aggrandizement, his iron will, and his readiness to fight are shown to be the ones which impress black women and children into servitude and powerlessness. On the mother’s part, the middle-class ideals she has internalized - respectability, upward mobility, marriage, children - contribute to her inability to change the situation effectively. It is no coincidence at all that the parents live on a street called Bluff Street. The name implies a way of life of the black middle-class which Katherine scorns and rejects. On the way back from a trip to St. Louis with her mother, she feels that they are

going away into their half-life, their sheltered middle-class, tree-shaded left-over mansions, to continue playing at something they weren’t, becoming dimmer and dimmer likenesses of what they should have been and, instead of getting stronger and clearer and more absolute in themselves as people, picking up life-draining habits from the great middle class they imitated, losing in the process all of the ancient, life-giving ones.⁶³⁰

Dunham’s vision of black family life reads clear-eyed and unsentimentally, an institution both injured and self-injuring.

Delving in the second chapter, “The Closed Room”, into her family genealogy, Dunham provides a glimpse at her father’s first marriage in order to explain the circumstances into which she has been born. Although his first wife was 20 years his senior and already had several grown children, the ambitious tailor apprentice was deeply attracted to Fanny June. He married her for love, but of similar significance were her fair skin, her property holdings in the City and her assistant principalship at a big school. The relationship between Fanny June’s two families was anything but harmonious. The growing resentment turned out to originate in internal hierarchies: “the ‘near whites’ against the ‘all blacks.’”⁶³¹ In order to escape “social discrimination and malicious comment and . . . disagreeable situations,”⁶³² Alfred Dunham felt hurried into moving to a white-dominated, middle-class suburb, only to encounter further difficulties. Again the conspicuous couple met open resentment, not only because of their outer dissimilarity, but also because they were considered menacing invaders whose presence would lead to social deterioration and economic decline. To stop those terrorist attempts which were intended to deter them from settling in

⁶³⁰ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 178f.

⁶³¹ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 35.

this village, Alfred fell back on his repertoire of patriarchal norms which sustain and encourage violence:

Told what had happened by Earley Clark, he descended from the six o'clock interurban armed with a double-barreled shotgun, determination in his stride, murder in his eyes. The neighbors had counted on no such reaction and withdrew behind their piles of brick and cement bags to confer, or peeped between starched bungalow curtains, watching the angry young man inspect the damage [at his house], look about defiantly, and then install himself in the tool shed on the front of the lot. Here he sat down for a vigil that extended through that night, until the last coat of paint had been applied to the house and the carriage barn behind it.⁶³³

Alfred Dunham's strategy was successful, the threat of lethal violence against anybody who dared obstruct his goals sufficed to discourage the racist villagers. It is interesting to note that Alfred Dunham's decision on the family's place of residence was largely at odds with the human instinct of gregariousness, which, being a means to ensure strength and security, can often be found among members of minority groups. He decided for exactly that village which did not possess a strong, supportive black community, where he was on his own in his fight against discrimination and prejudice. His main preoccupation, to gain and maintain "a foothold in a community where the color of his skin was a handicap,"⁶³⁴ even suggests that it was the very absence of a black community which made the village of Glen Ellyn attractive to him. In this context the choice of Glen Ellyn possibly points to social definitions of masculinity which induced him to search repeatedly for such situations which allowed him to demonstrate his individual power and superiority.

With his second wife, he again settles in a "white" district of the Town, where mostly Germans and Irish live. Because of prejudices on both sides, the family is in a socially isolated position and has almost no contact in the immediate vicinity. While the Dunhams are regarded as strangers, the neighbors are considered by Katherine's mother to be "shanty", socially inferior. Contact exists mainly between the Dunhams and the Simons, a family of German descent, which is able to meet Alfred and particularly Annette Dunham's requirements. This friendship, however, is not built on solid ground and instantly breaks down when the father misinterprets an originally funny incidence as a personal insult and a challenge to his authority. When his daughter tells him that the father's friend has taught her to say in German "Mein

⁶³² Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 14.

⁶³³ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 16.

⁶³⁴ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 169.

Arsch und dein Gesicht sind Zwillinge,” Alfred Dunham explodes instantly. Without listening to Katherine’s explanation, he rushes to confront the imaginary offender and leaves his frightened daughter waiting for the fury to erupt: “As she sadly put the meat for dinner in the icebox at the top of the upstairs hall, she prepared herself for the worst. Once her father had his way with Henry Simon, she knew she would be next.”⁶³⁵ Although the text does not reveal how this conflict is solved, it shows that the father’s main recourse to survive and defend his position against the numerous real or potential pitfalls in society is violence.

To demonstrate what he has achieved, Alfred Dunham draws upon desirable and potent status symbols: he scrimps and saves to purchase a temperamental racehorse and later on an elegant automobile. Indeed, the horse gains him recognition in circles where

he was stranger than a stranger, but admiration for the spirited and apparently blooded animal that he turned in show-off circles in the hitching yard of the wholesale supply market and the unspoken challenge as he trotted her, reined in just far enough to make their racing instincts function, overcame their instinctive mistrust of outsiders.⁶³⁶

Alfred Dunham succeeds in arousing an embarrassed feeling of respect among some of his neighbors on Bluff Street. One day when he proves able to calm down a pair of bolting stallions in front of a crowd of cowardly Irishmen, the wagoner heaps racist insults on him in return for his help. Deeply injured, the father makes up for this humiliation by seeking success in combat:

. . . he appeared to grow taller; he passed the bit to his son without turning his head and took a step forward, hands forming into fists, nostrils distending so that from where the girl stood she could see the red of flushed membranes inside. No one seemed to be willing or able to do anything to stop the terrible thing that was happening. She had never seen her father so angry . . . alone on a small island of violence.⁶³⁷

While the majority of onlookers simply hold their breath and hesitate with becoming involved in the looming fight, the Irish blacksmith who has unwillingly learned to appreciate Alfred Dunham for his knowledge and handling of horses brings himself to intervene and declare the cursing drayman persona non grata on Bluff Street. It is only at this very tense moment when a person of authority sides with Katherine’s father against the offending party that the other Irish spectators, who

⁶³⁵ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 96f.

⁶³⁶ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 73.

⁶³⁷ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 163.

hold the Bluff Street residents to be socially superior, dare to distance themselves openly from what has been happening. For Alfred Dunham's self-esteem, this incident in his quest for acceptance, envy and admiration is probably most unsettling. Three significant questions remain open, admitting no easy answers: Firstly, if the driver had not evinced so much brutality in his effort to quieten down the stallions and if the driver had not been a social outsider on Bluff Street, would he have been offered any support at all? Secondly and related to the first, would he have received help if he had not been a resident on Bluff Street? Thirdly, if the blacksmith had not communicated his condemnation, would the others have remained passive and silent?

Nowhere in *A Touch of Innocence* is the internalization of racist, sexist and capitalist norms more visible than in the thinking and acting of Katherine's father, but the child is aware that abuse also rules in the extended family. Long before her own father begins to beat his family, the young girl has met and learned to fear male violence personified in her half sister's husband, whose family regularly seeks refuge from the drunken perpetrator at the Dunhams, causing much improvisation and disturbance. Thus, the family is presented as an important channel of those cultural attitudes and values which imply that violence is a legitimate means for solving problems.

Katherine's observation of violent tendencies at home is supplemented by her initiation into the rules and cultural "scripts" which govern behavior outside the family. During her two-year stay with her aunt in the City, she is confronted with a unsupportive, abusive environment where violence is naturalized and normalized. Great psychological damage is inflicted on the four-year-old when she is caught up in a bloody battle between two rivals in the middle of the street.

The man whose back had been turned to her walked with jerking, stilted steps to the sidewalk on the side where the child sat in the automobile, and started in her direction, the other man following, still holding in front of him the shiny object, which wasn't a knife because it bent backward and away from his fist. She became suddenly terrified, without knowing why. All of the violence that she had seen in the faces of the streets between the elevated station and her Aunt Lulu's bedroom crowded against her, and she drew as far back into the seat as she could, rigid, wanting to cry out, but so taken by dread that her mouth dried and her heart moved into her throat. The man reached the automobile in a series of zigzags across the sidewalk. He wavered at the open window of the automobile, trying to say something, but it was hard because his lower lip couldn't reach his upper lip. His face was neatly separated into two parts from his ear right through the slit of his mouth, making a mouth several times longer than it

should be. Pink flesh showed, and a row of white teeth. He seemed to be trying to say something like “He’p, he’p,” but while he paused, bright red welled over the pink and drenched the white teeth and began to stream down his chest and onto his clothing and the running board and the sidewalk. He looked into the eyes of a fear-congealed child, decided that there was no help, and turned away into the street . . . The other man stalked at a distance behind, and the woman sat drunkenly on the steps of the building in front of which the spectacle had taken place.⁶³⁸

The most obvious impact of this conflict is that although Katherine is “only” an accidental observer, she begins to feel an overwhelming degree of terror as if she were directly or physically involved in it. Her suffering is compounded by the fact that her experiences remain undigested for a long time. The exposure to diverse, but chronic, patterns of both direct and indirect violence from an early age makes her very perceptive of the wide spectrum of abusive behavior without being able to understand at this particular moment what is really going on. This brutal account is particularly remarkable insofar as it marks the child’s instinctive connecting of two different forms of violence: a personal type (the fight of the two opponents) and a structural type (the hobo in the streets), which correlate closely.⁶³⁹ This passage suggests that Katherine suspects that violence is restricted neither to familial violence in a domestic setting nor to interpersonal violence on the community level.

Kept loosely tied into social history and thereby taking on a personal as well as a historic significance, Dunham’s early childhood memories contain a depressing amount of genuine socioeconomic observation interwoven with the child’s view of everyday life in the City. The community’s struggle for survival, pervading racism and humiliation, debilitating poverty and decaying neighborhoods elucidate the various factors that prevent the full development of both a child’s and an adult’s potential. They refer to the very real abuse caused by social arrangements which are a result of social policies. Non-personal violence is presented as the way some sectors of society monopolize decision-making processes, gain control over others, establish hierarchies and encompass an unequal distribution of resources. *A Touch of Innocence* shows that structural, institutionally reinforced inequality not only results in violence, but also represents in itself a form of violence.

⁶³⁸ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 48f.

⁶³⁹ Galtung has developed a very useful typology of violence. His definition of violence has been widely adopted by sociologists, physicians and psychologists to identify abuse at its earliest stages, among them for example David Gil. *Child Abuse and Violence*. New York: AMS Press, 1979 and Petra Heißenburger. *Strukturelle und zwischenmenschliche Gewalt*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1997.

The court's decision to withdraw the father's custody of the children is based on an individualistic explanation and consequently excludes the structures underlying inadequate resources and wider social and economic factors. Katherine's malnutrition, the dangerous social surroundings, the poor housing conditions, the lack of day care are all evidences of abuse. The court tackles the issues on the individual instead of on the broader social policy level, thus highlighting the politically self-serving focus of a powerful "corporate actor".⁶⁴⁰

Sharing specific grievances, the examples of Lulu Dunham and Annette Dunham demonstrate that single parenthood and the ensuing matrilocal family pattern is fraught with fundamental problems as long as single mothers are held accountable for their own destitute situation. If Katherine accuses Annette Dunham of inconsistency in her striving for peaceful coexistence and of tendentious overcompliance with the unacceptable behavior of her father, she does not do so without acknowledging the immense difficulties involved in raising children without a partner, difficulties which finally make the mother return to her spouse.

The paradoxically premature and at the same time immature girl looks at her life circumstances with shame.

But there was no money, and the pictures printed in the school annual was a permanent witness not only to her suffering, but to all of the hidden things in families that one shouldn't tell or be let known: her mother living in one house and her father in another; cardboard neatly folded into shoe soles, but not very useful in rain or snow; her father and brother tossing, locked together on the dining-room floor, with murderous intent; her secret knowledge shared with the tramp, long ago but still there; and now, for her brother, the sanatorium, because he had gone without food while he studied and lived in winter where there was no heat except a kerosene stove . . .⁶⁴¹

Dunham's memoir excavates and publishes family secrets, which is necessary because Katherine has come to understand that her problems are not indicative of individual failure but of social inequalities. Katherine has adapted to survive these negative experiences, but her withdrawal, her low self-esteem, her sense of guilt, her hypersensitivity and her anxiety disclose how deeply traumatized she is. Her only

⁶⁴⁰ The term "corporate actor" is borrowed from the sociologist James S. Coleman. It is used instead of the terms "organization" or "institution" to highlight the quasi-person quality of this social edifice, its power and its partiality. In analogy to a physical, natural person, a corporate actor has particular rights and resources and protects its own, specific interests. James S. Coleman. *The Asymmetric Society*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982.

⁶⁴¹ Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 288.

consolation is the hope that her sentence is limited in time, that one day she might be rescued from

. . . the Town, the West Side Cleaners and Dyers, the flat on Bluff Street, the cottage on Elmwood Avenue, the unawareness of her mother, the tyranny of her father, corporeal punishment, financial insecurity, the disintegration of the dust wheel, the morbid attraction of the quarry, the loneliness, . . . the uncertainties of her questing childhood and defeated adolescence.⁶⁴²

Although Katherine is able to leave all this behind, the text concludes abruptly and neither explores to which degree she is actually able to “switch off” her experiences nor does it provide many clues to the psychological long-term effects of her experiences. In spite of the young woman’s finally hopeful posture, *A Touch of Innocence* ends on a slightly chilling note. Although the protagonist enters a new stage in life, her problems with her social environment are not over. Despite recurrent encounters with racism, she fails to interpret the many signs of discrimination at her new workplace. In light of her past experiences, this failure is somewhat surprising. Based upon the assumption that Katherine has “forgotten” plainly racist humiliations, her disposition to bury, that is to repress, those past experiences displays an inner mechanism which defends her developing self against the painful memories of early hurtful situations. This mechanism seems to work by producing a state of “amnesia” in regard to the damaging situation. The girl has no control over this “amnesia” which does not allow her to express feelings of anger and rage. Thus the childish psyche is protected from pain. Katherine avoids looking back and concentrates exclusively on the problems of the present. It is finally in this sense that Dunham’s memoir contains the autobiographical element of introspection. Utilizing the autobiographical genre as a therapeutic process of history-taking, she uncovers those childhood incidents in which she has been so badly hurt in order to stop the wounds from continuing to fester and from erupting destructively into the present. Throughout the text, there are authorial hints that the protagonist is successful in this because she has been endowed with dimensions of other, psychologically liberating possibilities. There are clear indications that Katherine’s life is not coterminous with those mystical boundaries which the child believes to be dominating her life. For her the possibility of art turns into an alternative and effective style of defense against the naked brutality of conditions and into the road to freedom.

⁶⁴² Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence*, 310.

6.5.3. Summary

Despite various and striking differences, Cabeza de Baca and Dunham both offer an interpretation of how their generation views their gendered pasts. Both engage in marking individual and collective experiences in order to oppose minority women's historiographic erasure. In a bold endeavor to define their being in their own terms and to inscribe themselves upon a race- and gender-blind history as a warrant against oblivion, they are reaching back into their own female past for the authority to rename their experiences. Without making claims to total objectivity or truthfulness, their subjective and personal experiences are presumed to be an authentic, representative expression of the past.

Both authors focus on women's lives in the past, their daily activities and their positions, thus presenting alternate models of historiography. For them, the choice of occupying a central place in their tradition and history is a tremendous movement toward self-definition and resistance against oppressive structures in American society and history. Needless to say, each text considers the historically meaningful and important roles of women as encompassing more than the field of love and family. Instead, they are figured as working actively in the social and material world they inhabit along with men. Even family work assumes an inherently political meaning, in the sense of pertaining to power relations between different cultures, between the sexes and between diverse classes. However, beside their shared need to formulate a specifically feminine perspective, Cabeza de Baca and Dunham point at the qualitative variety in the experiences of women while retelling their (personal) histories and express a wider understanding of what constitutes historical realities. They record in different forms and different registers the effects of cultural, social and economic subjection and oppression.

Cabeza de Baca's incentive to write appears to be related primarily to the ways in which a "foreign" culture imposes itself as a dominating force on another culture and affirms through various devices the latter's inferior status. Through the prism of her own experiences, she mobilizes the past, turns to what she considers to be the community's resources against the aftermath of colonialism and the combined presence of capitalism and sexism to secure the cultural survival of her community. For Dunham, the conflict over culture between different cultural systems is of lesser importance. More than Cabeza de Baca, she highlights those intra-racial hierarchies,

which have structured the past and delimited the role and status of women. Accordingly, the two writers express contrary emotions on the socio-psychological standing of women: Cabeza de Baca's book bespeaks fond memories, whereas Dunham's book records a sense of alienation. Cabeza de Baca recovers the community's past in a largely idealizing gesture of identification with and pride for its female members. Dunham's text, in contrast, comprises an exploration of the problematic nature of cross-gender relationships and constructs a history which leaves hardly any room for nostalgia or romantic currents.

Whether proud or critical in intention and tone, both authors address Mexican American or African American women as historical subjects, draw attention to individual lives and everyday perspectives, textualize social differences and redefine what is of historical significance. Neither facts nor circumstances, but personal reactions to them are seen as shaping the course of history. Reconsidering a network of power relations and subject positions and reinterpreting the experiences and roles of average women in the past, they dynamically create their own history.

6.6. The Representation of Ruptured Experiences

The literary modulations of the discourse of womanhood cover a whole range of narrative forms. Different subjects, purposes and readerships called for different genres and techniques. Always comprising an experimental dimension, the creative character of fiction, for example, allowed the writers an imaginative coordination of their individual visions with personal interpretations of structures, facts and events. The autobiographical genre on the other hand permitted the writers to express their selves more directly and to offer authentic insights into the way they personally sensed objective conditions of an era as well as diverse forms of repression. But even if an autobiography, for instance Rosebrough's, refers to facts like war-induced economic improvement, it would be wrong to take the world her text represents as an objective reflection or image-double of the historical reality. Omissions, avoidance and errors are characteristics of Rosebrough's narrative as well as all autobiographical writings. These result from the option the writers have to present their versions of private reality. Like fiction and any other cultural product,

autobiographies are not only an illustration, but also a subjective interpretation of experience.

Differences in approach, vision and talent are evident throughout. Hence, some texts offer fresh and original perspectives while others seem to be “conventional” or even of “minor” quality according to literary standards. Although one might critically add that these standards have worked to the effect of marginalizing these texts in the processes of canon formation. In terms of both style and plot line, Wallace’s novel tells the paradigmatic traditional story, presenting a culturally conservative vision of a woman’s responsibility to renounce ambition and accept a narrow code which defines women as homebound. The book’s “happy ending” places the heroine in the home sequestered away from the marketplace and public arena, finding her happiness instead in the warmth and love of human relations. As conventional as this novel is on the surface, it resonates with ambiguities and inconsistencies, hinting at a profound disjunction between the book’s explicit and implicit messages and producing a complexity worthy of study.

At first glance, all these texts reveal a conventional value orientation. Converging thematically on the scholarly debate, they present a surface narrative which conveys an acceptance of stock notions about the proper place of women in postwar society. For the sake of persuasion, authors like Wong and Cabeza de Baca largely sidestepped off-putting issues and tones. Instead of immediately antagonizing their readers, they relied on those social scripts for women with which the readers most likely were acquainted. Thus effecting processes of identification among their readers they could hope to win a broader base of support. The topics of the academic discourse provided a safe, noncontroversial means through which authors could then reopen the question of womanhood with more daring, even revisionist suggestions.

I want to propose that this thematic correspondence was not simply a tactical concession to dominant ideologies. Although the characters in the narratives experience the differential impact of race-specific patterns of living and thought, they share with American women of all other backgrounds the limited range of life options. In this context the specious construction of protagonists who search for orientation with the aid of broadly accepted values and norms substantiated the claim for “Americanism”. In foregrounding common ideas on womanhood women of color could express their sense of belonging to American society and affirm their right to

the American creed of equal rights for all. Both the thematic impulses and narrative strategies suggest that many authors appropriated those subjects that were most relevant to the lives of minority women. In this sense then they were part of a conservative era with which they partially identified.

This picture becomes more complicated upon closer scrutiny. In their writings, women writers of color disclosed the peculiar texture of their everyday lives, problems and possibilities. Proceeding from these social domains, they covered those “nonstandard” worlds they inhabited, but the scholarly imaginations of female existence, left out. The communicated knowledge bore little resemblance to the perspectives of those groups with whom they were struggling to become equal. Rarely in a position to meet the requirements for a “perfect” and “natural” woman, they stepped outside their customary sphere by professing priorities and making choices which almost imperceptibly undermined the exclusive academic agenda. Experiences in all the realms of day-to-day survival obstructed the wholehearted endorsement of gender standards and opened the way for the transformations of consciousness and subjectivities. Thus Niggli’s and Chang’s books argue for a revision of the relationship between and role of males and females. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Scandal at Daybreak* demonstrate that there is no inherently feminine character, but that identities are constructed from and vary according to complex webs of social relations. In connection with a particular set of questions about their education and employment, Wong’s and Wallace’s texts illustrate how a network of structures and institutions interacts to control minority women’s economic and social roles. Both texts obliquely explore the possibility of female independence and envision freedom from restrictions placed on women of color in postwar society. Cabeza de Baca’s and Dunham’s recourse to memories and experiences in *The Good Life* and *A Touch of Innocence* respectively was committed to progressive social change by detailing the past and the contributions of ordinary women. The emphasis on women’s influence as well as their subordination serves to construct a balance between power and victimization. It attests to a belief that women’s position in society is not predestined and can be changed.

However oblique the criticism in these books might seem, it is somewhat effective, for the coded messages undercut the authority of traditional gender constructions. All these books do contain more or less audible murmurings against the academic conception of feminine role and identity that induced guilt and anxiety in many

women who deviated from pervasive conceptions. Thus in the texts, the affirmation of dominant stereotypes coexists with an undercurrent of despair and dissatisfaction. Below a surface of consensus, there are innumerable signs of unrest; an uneasiness which is often muted, but undeniably present. I wish to stress that these writers are not formulating outright protest or advocating open rebellion. Likewise it would be an error to consider their texts as feminist statements. Rather, the contradictions and inconsistencies in the narratives signify a prerebellious and prefeminist subtext which has its origins in each writer's social positioning in and between various discourses.

Where the books reveal a duplicity in the treatment of gender differences, meanings of femininity, women's integration in the labor market and women's historical legacy, it is a sign of competing desires. It mirrors complex processes of difference and identification with normative images of being female, because the writers simultaneously associated themselves with and distanced themselves from the dominant models of gender dimorphism. Their experiences left them alienated from and bound to prevailing definitions of women in ways that separated them from those of white women. Speaking from a complex positionality, they were able to connect the various, contradictory parameters within which their experiences were both produced and lived. Their political, economic, and social background bequeathed to them a particular view that exposed the artificial or problematic aspects of gender constructions. As they were standing at the intersections of complex webs of relations, women writers of color negotiated between conflicting collectivities. Their texts served to both screen and reveal rebellious insights. The presentation of individual knowledge, memories, circumstances and practices in their books was shaped by these contradictory impulses.

Also in the context of audience and interaction, the reasons behind the writers' mobilization of a peculiar set of experiences and a specific form of knowledge are intelligible. Their public speaking and their careers as authors made them by definition deviant. As public speakers they proceeded in such a way that a general validity of their experiences was taken for granted, confirming the significance of their writing. Personal experiences of the tensions between occupation and home became a starting point to mediate and make understandable the pressure exerted by existing ideals of womanhood. Contending with a myriad of problems, they could approach the subject of women and their role in society from the perspective of a woman directly affected. *Vis-à-vis* an audience consisting of women of color, they

could assume a commonality of experience which made detailed descriptions almost redundant. In contrast, the dialogue with white male and female readers established an interaction which necessitated an elaboration of the contingent nature of experiences and its complex gender-, race- and class-specific production. Although women writers of color generalized from their experiences, these generalizations were not simply taken for granted, but examined and explicated.

If the texts present varying strategies to subvert the hegemonic discourse, they do so in both deliberate and inadvertent ways. The patriotic consensus forged during World War II and the ensuing anticommunist paranoia occasioned a public posture among various writers of color which avoided the impression of radicalism and discontent with national values. Therefore many writers were notably reluctant to struggle openly against both sexism and racism. They focussed instead on themes which were unlikely to arouse suspicion. Behind the safe and protective covers of traditional narrative subjects and conventions they were able to deflect their critique of postwar society and at the same time to call for important changes.

7. Conclusion: Contours of a Multifaceted Postwar History

The voices of women of color offer an illuminating example of how they made sense of their situation. Their representations show them grappling with the conflicting demands of existing socioeconomic realities and pervasive ideals of womanhood. In contrast to the totalizing, intellectual treatises, the books reveal that being a woman was not extractable from the context in which one was a woman. Clearly, the awareness of class and race differences which were largely absent from the scientific discourse of the feminine played a primary role in the particular way women writers of color tackled standard conceptions of womanhood.

If understood as functions of the almost invisible internal ruptures and silences in the white-dominated discourse of womanhood, the texts of minority women can serve to reaccentuate the spectrum of authority and the effectiveness of conservative images. While the diffuse academic explorations already contained opposing messages about white women, they failed to encompass the diversity of American women. Whether reactionary or liberal, the theoretical arguments did not account for the situation and the needs of women of color and necessitated reworking. Thus the literary texts are poised between those tensions and conflicts that were postwar society's ambivalences about women's role, nature and conduct.

What I have termed the experience of diverse social positionings in the preceding chapter results from the relation between the institutional discourse of womanhood and the political, economic and social location of women of color in postwar society. Situated in conflicting material and discursive domains, their experiences engender a multiplicity of subject positions and identities. In the postwar years many women writers of color felt confronted with the question of whether the ideas of womanhood that so saturated theoretical writings and found their way into the public were segregated ones, conceptions strictly formulated within the limits of racial differences. If the academic models of the 1940s and 1950s provided their theoretical version of womanhood, various literary texts of the postwar period disclosed in which ways authors submitted to the institutional discourse, negotiated it or opposed it and hence demarcated its boundaries.

The simultaneity of texts and subtexts becomes comprehensible if considered against the contextual background of specific historical and discursive settings. Indeed, for women of color the disjunction between dominant conceptions of

womanhood and measurable, objective conditions of existence involved contradictions and tensions. Not only in fiction they must have gone through strong personal conflicts as they encountered standards and precepts which contrasted sharply with the socioeconomic realities of their communities.

Their experiences of being both an outsider and an insider in discursive contexts enabled them to communicate a plurality of differences, perspectives and strategies. Already by revealing the circumstances of their daily lives, women writers of color propose another way in which the story of postwar American society might be written. All books feature protagonists who draw their sense of themselves not merely from their familial roles or from the domestic ideal. No matter how conservative or conventional some of the narratives analyzed may appear, they have much to say about acceptance and relevance of hegemonic concepts of womanhood. Both theoretical and literary texts participated in circulating the discursive knowledge about womanhood in the postwar years. While scholarly gender conceptions automatically conceded power, public recognition, social mobility and personal accomplishment to men, they mostly questioned these qualities when it came to women. Wartime developments especially produced a strong drive to put limits on women's aspirations and opportunities, but the form this urge takes in the narratives reflects a relation between mechanisms of order and those of protest. While the impact of the conservative prescriptive literature cannot be denied, the narratives by women of color help to see that they did not identify themselves primarily as victims of oppressive, white-defined ideologies. Instead their texts show how each writer approached accepted notions of womanhood and inserted particular experiences into the debate. In the texts examined here, minority women's experiences proved to be a compelling means of appropriating discursive space and challenging dominant discourses.

More sharply than any other cultural expression, the literary texts expose upon close examination the tensions that bind discrete American people to a common culture. In breaking the silence about women of color in a public arena writers transformed the discursive thinking about women into a controversial domain. By way of addressing experiences which have been considered peripheral, minority women responded to their own exclusion from the essentialist discourse of womanhood. They questioned both its contents and its standardization of womanhood and posed a significant challenge to American power relations. Insofar

as all literary texts generally are located between the poles of discursive participation and antagonism with others, these texts were articulations of participatory and antagonistic social relations. Thus they shaped not only counterhegemonic, but also hegemonic and cultural categories. Their grappling with white- and male-dominant ideological models of womanhood provides significant clues to wider ideological transformations which were taking place alongside reflections on postwar power configurations. In contrast to any other group in postwar society, women of color were in a position to sense - knowingly and unknowingly - the framing limits of the color- and class-evasive language and contents of the discourse of womanhood. Particularly for them this sweeping network of ideas involved the acute awareness that the depicted realities simply did not match their own situation, even in those cases when they looked as if they did. The memories and experiences in their texts were invoked to make sense of this contradictory situation. The narrative fiction of women of color presented subjects who acted according to variant ideologies, ideologies which were in opposition to the existing material apparatus of American society. Inevitably, the cultural practices of any generation are influenced or determined by its own material conditions of existence and by the theoretical assumptions of its times.

In investigating the history of American women in the years following World War II, historians have contributed to a narrow image of womanhood. The celebration of domestic ideology and the quiescence of organized feminism pointed at an overwhelming acceptance of women's traditional roles. They often supposed, rather than demonstrated, that it was in the late 1960s when women progressives and activists began to articulate their critique of American society. The contradictions and ambiguities in texts by women of color show that already a decade earlier many of them were highly sensitive to the disparity of ideology and the realities of their own experiences. They expressed in their books the realization that their lives bore no relation to prevalent images surrounding their roles. Since their experiences opened the way for transformations of consciousness and subjectivity these writers prepared the foundations for the rebellion in the 1960s. Thus the new feminist movement, having its origins in the critique of prescribed life patterns, owes its existence much more to women of color than for example to America's youth, which has commonly been considered the social ferment of women's liberation.⁶⁴³

⁶⁴³ See for example Sara Evans. *Personal Politics*. New York 1979.

It was my intention to show an era which is not only marked by conformity, but also by conflicting interests. My version not only speaks of containment and conservatism, but also of refusals and textual subversion. If it revolves around power, it is a power which not only means disadvantage, subjugation and oppression, but which also entails the possibility of resistance against hegemonic power structures.

Recalling women of color as producers, dissenters and as radical forces in American (literary) history might mean that the image of postwar America is still wide open. New questions can give us an altered understanding of the whole postwar society. As the postwar decade looks different if it is remembered that women of color were also there, the construction of alternative literary traditions is able to shed new light on the postwar period. Thus the postwar period can profit from a re-examination of minority women's voices. Instead of strengthening existing ideas about American society, they offer a degree of dissent which suggests that the seeds of today's diversity had already been sown. As a result, the accepted political connotations of conformity, consensus and content in the postwar era begin to diminish, and such generalizations are qualified with a much greater sense of ambiguity and contradiction. Had the contradictions within the academic debate been acknowledged earlier and had these conceptions been connected with minority women's literature, a more complex, inclusive and accurate interpretation of postwar U. S. women's history might have been the result. If history is understood as a cacophony of voices, then the recognition and inclusion of diverse historical and cultural experiences enable us today to perceive alternatives in the social structures of postwar society. A shift in sources and focus might help to alter the stereotypical impression of benign tranquility and quiescence and contributes to an understanding of the years between 1945 and 1960 as moments of fundamental rethinking and dawning transformation. Insofar as the texts demonstrate the struggle for power and liberation from restrictive dictates, they echo and multiply the contradictions of the postwar discourse of womanhood which was the essential precondition for those social changes of the 1960s and 1970s.

American culture is the product of historical struggles. While the direct bearing of the writings by women of color on political and economic decisions cannot be measured, it seems that they became a long-term catalyst for the political transformations that took place in the following 20 years. Today we have to

acknowledge that their understanding of society and history was in principle able to question the conceptions and practices of the hegemonic culture. However it is questionable whether they had enough cultural power to replace dominant conceptions immediately. Still, the ability of the literature by women of color to substitute for hegemonic constructs depended not only on the degree to which their counterdiscourse succeeded in destabilizing current structures in society, but also on the permanence and stamina of this counterdiscourse. The power of these textual representations of the world lay in their potential to shape human consciousness. In this light the interventions of women writers of color were vital in rendering the discourse of womanhood contingent and permeable.

The notion of power is also pertinent in regard to the absence of the texts by women of color in literary histories. This absence is possibly the result of power structures, because the prevalence of certain cultural expressions is based on the silencing of those who lacked the power to ensure that their views would prevail. This point particularly brings my discussion back to the interrelated issue of the literary canon and processes of canon formation. Even if past or present values shut out certain texts from (literary) history on the grounds of their “minor” quality, this neither means that these texts are in fact of minor or no quality nor that critics have to accept this exclusion. Instead of accepting stifling criteria and judgments, one might ask for example why some texts were and are incorporated into the canon while others were and are not.

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Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die vorliegende Dissertation selbständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt habe.

Die Dissertation ist bisher keiner anderen Fakultät vorgelegt worden. Ich erkläre, dass ich bisher kein Promotionsverfahren erfolglos beendet habe und dass keine Aberkennung eines bereits erworbenen Doktorgrades vorliegt.

Osnabrück, im April 2003

Christiane Kollenberg