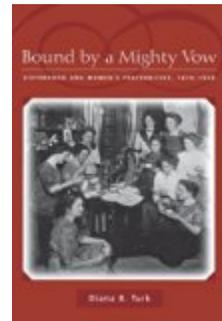


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Diana B. Turk. *Bound by a Mighty Vow: Sisterhood and Women's Fraternities, 1870-1920*. New York: New York University Press, 2004. x + 243 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8275-0; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-8282-8.

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Sisterhood Reconsidered

Sisterhood, as Diana Turk's history of women's Greek-letter fraternities demonstrates, can be as deeply conservative as it can be liberating. In the case of women's college sororities, founded during the 1870s, sisterhood created a "mighty vow," but it also drew some hard and fast social distinctions that were anything but democratic. Turk has tackled a subject that is nothing if not controversial. As she observes in her preface, "people are rarely neutral on the subject of Greek-letter fraternities" (p. vii). In this volume, however, Turk attempts to present a "fair and accurate" picture of these associations (p. vii). Insisting that her stance is "neutral," Turk explores, from the inside, the life and practices of one sorority in particular, Kappa Alpha Theta. While her history is carefully researched and engagingly written, her "neutrality" ultimately prevents her from examining important assumptions that defined the very purpose of college sororities.

Turk's approach to the history of women's Greek societies is generational. Using Kappa Alpha Theta as a case study, she marks three stages in the development of sororities on American college campuses. Sororities debuted during the 1870s with the first generation of women to attend college. Facing considerable opposition to their presence on campus, this pioneer generation, Turk argues, felt compelled to prove that women were intellectually and socially the equals of men. The four women who founded Kappa Alpha Theta at a small liberal arts school in Indiana (soon to become DePauw University) declared themselves "of serious mind and pur-

pose" and, Turk insists, were motivated by a desire to collectively combat the notion that women had no place in higher education (p. 13). Taking male fraternities as their model, the women developed secret rituals and an elaborate body of rules to govern their organization. Using a language of "sisterhood," they declared themselves "bound by a mighty vow" which would tie them together for life (p. 3).

This first generation of sorority women, Turk argues, consciously stretched the bounds of domesticity and asserted a new role for women. The sorority founders, she says, sought to go beyond "the old occupations of home-making and teaching" and to establish women as capable, professional, and intelligent members of society (p. 23). This first generation, Turk insists, emphasized intellectual and academic achievement. Kappa Alpha Theta's first constitution, for example, stressed that new members receive "high standing" in their studies and new chapters wrote to college deans requesting the names of the "smartest girls" (pp. 25-26). According to Turk, many Kappas were also members of Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society and often were among the top achieving women on campus. Sororities, she insists, "effectively re-defined for themselves the feminine ideal, broadening it to include intellectual capacity along with the more socially accepted traits of morality and social grace" (p. 35). Turk suggests that this generation of sorority women was made up of high achievers who, as historians have previously documented, chose career over marriage. Unfortunately, however, much of the author's argument regard-

ing the professional and marital status of Kappa Alpha Theta alumnae is taken from surveys conducted shortly after the women graduated. She asserts that “for the thousands of sisters who lived their lives without spouses or companions, fraternity connections likely proved important” (p.147). While this may have been true, one wonders whether the core of post-college sorority life centered on unmarried career women, particularly since daughters began to appear as the next generation of recruits.

If the first generation of sorority women took their studies seriously and committed themselves to Greek life in order to “broaden and redefine” women’s roles, the second generation strayed from that purpose. According to Turk, this second generation plunged enthusiastically and wholeheartedly into social life with the familiar emphasis on fashion, parties, and sociability. The explanation for this shift is simply the fact that, by the early twentieth century, women were no longer such a minority on college campuses and no longer had to prove their worth in the intellectual arena. This younger generation concentrated on “banquets, spreads, and cozies” (p. 48) and spent considerable energy promoting their own sorority over other competing societies. Indeed, Turk suggests that by the early twentieth century, membership in women’s Greek societies increased dramatically (although at no time did sorority members number more than a third of the nation’s coeds).

The turn toward socializing appeared at the same time that sororities themselves were expanding and becoming national organizations. Turk’s central argument is that the pressure to maintain national standards and identities forced sororities into a decidedly conservative mold. Maintaining unity across a national network, she says, led to an increasingly strong boundary between those who were considered “appropriate material” and those who were excluded. Indeed, as early as the 1890s, sororities became increasingly concerned about social class and family background as well as religious and ethnic distinctions. Here we begin to see the familiar picture of sorority exclusivity. Turk has revealing evidence of sorority chapters rejecting potential members because they did not meet standards of dress or appearance, or because they were Jewish, Catholic, or African-American. She weakly suggests that sorority exclusivity stemmed from the fact that the white middle and upper classes in American society were threatened by these “new” groups. The world was, she says, “stressful” for white, Protestant Americans who faced challenges to their status and thus banned together in sororities to help “navi-

gate the complex and at times threatening social worlds of America at the turn of the century” (pp. 159-160).

Turk devotes a chapter to the anti-fraternity sentiment that developed in response to the exclusivity and anti-intellectualism of Greek life. Even though a number of women reformers and suffrage activists (including Mary Beard and Anna Howard Shaw) belonged to sororities, they were usually quiet about their affiliations. Rather, deans of women as well as educational reformers like Marion Talbot actively opposed Greek societies. By the early twentieth century a number of campuses, notably state universities, began to restrict fraternity activity. Those universities which continued to tolerate Greek societies appear to have done so largely to solve housing problems. Indeed, it seems that sorority alumnae became so alarmed by the opposition to Greek life that they began to insist on reforms. Alums who had previously encouraged sisters “not to focus too narrowly on scholarship” began to institute rules banning members with low grades from participating in social activities (p. 119). They also passed rules limiting the number of parties and the costs of social events. Nonetheless, Turk notes, local chapters often ignored grade checks and waived the rules to allow poor students to attend parties anyway. Despite a generally critical public attitude toward fraternities, however, they appear to have prospered, attracting increasing numbers of college women throughout the World War I period. By the 1920s, even deans of women agreed to work with Greek societies. This was proof, Turk says, “of the full acceptance of fraternities as permanent features of American campus life” (p. 122).

Because this study focuses on sororities’ campus activities, the author does not develop a picture of the vast alumnae network associated with Greek societies. Although Turk devotes a chapter to the “post-college years,” she has little direct evidence about the impact of sorority membership on women in later life. By 1910, however, alumnae outnumbered college students as fraternity members. It is clear that while recruiting new members on campus was a critical focus of sorority life, alumnae activities really formed the heart of the fraternity experience. Turk does not tell us how sorority membership worked to build networks, solidify social ties, or establish and maintain social (that is class, ethnic, racial, and religious) boundaries in American life.

Turk’s book will change few minds. Those who think sororities are elitist and exclusionary will find their opinions amply validated. Those who are sympathetic toward Greek societies and claim the benefits of member-

ship will likewise find support. In her effort to be neutral, Turk ultimately eschews the central and difficult questions that such a study might confront. For example, she never discusses the fundamental concept of social status or the process by which social distinctions are perpetuated. Nor does she probe assumptions about the very notion of “popularity” or “fashion” and how these can operate as means of social exclusion. While she admits that fraternities “institutionalized practices of exclusivity and elitism” (p. 161), she neglects to explore the implications of those practices both within and outside the fraternity world. Finally, Turk’s argument that women’s fraternities fostered a sense of “sisterhood” among their

members neglects to explore the implications of that sisterhood. As Linda Kerber argued over two decades ago when describing the notion of “republican motherhood” that emerged after the American Revolution, the meaning of ideological and cultural constructs depends upon the use to which those ideas are put. Neither “republican motherhood” nor “sisterhood” inherently challenge domesticity and limited social roles for women. Since fraternity sisterhood was, at all times, limited, the element of belonging and the assertion of women’s capabilities worked to insulate members from democratic scrutiny. In the case of sororities, sisterhood might not be such an attractive idea.

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