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Conservative Clubwomen Define and Promote National Loyalty

Progressive activist J. Horace McFarland once said that love of country “keeps glowing the holy fire of patriotism.”[1] As Francesca Morgan shows in *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America*, it was Gilded Age and Progressive Era clubwomen who stoked the embers of both patriotism and nationalism. To date, these constructs have largely been examined in the context of the nation’s male political power structure, while work on clubwomen has focused on their progressive reform work and has neglected conservative activists. Morgan masterfully traces black and white conservative clubwomen’s self-construction as moral and cultural authorities, as well as their efforts to define and effect patriotism and nationalism. The book is a welcome and substantive addition to recent monographs on clubwomen’s activism and complements this scholarship geographically.[2]

Decades prior to federal patriotic and nationalistic projects, the integrated Woman’s Relief Corps (WRC), the all-white Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), all founded in the 1880s and 1890s and hundreds of thousands strong, became the patriotic “high priestesses” who stoked different versions of the “holy fire” described by McFarland (p. 19). (Although Morgan writes about other organizations, such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the National Council of Women, she focuses on the DAR, WRC, UDC, and NACW.) The missions of these organizations were shaped by long-standing debates about how to identify

and explain post-Civil War nationalism. In their own ways, clubwomen from each of these groups grappled with the meaning of national loyalty.

Morgan argues that each of these organizations emphasized civic nationalism, patriotism, and allegiance to federal authority. The women’s groups stressed ritual and tended to defer to male interests. Leaders and members were hesitant to define their activities as public political participation. The DAR and the UDC commemorated their respective soldiers’ bravery and loyalty to cause, preserving icons of the white past long before the rise of national historic preservation efforts. Like them, the WRC avoided the impression that its activities on behalf of Civil War nurses and veterans were political acts. It located its mission, upholding nationalism and patriotism under the aegis of the stars and stripes, in the domestic realm: members advocated classroom instruction on patriotism, including students’ daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. The WRC also sought to place flags in every classroom and was crucial in establishing the formal commemoration of Memorial Day as the nation’s “holy day.” The DAR, the UDC, and even the integrated WRC “walked hand in hand with Jim Crow” by professing an “official” race-based national unity that discarded what did not fit their definitions of unity, to the detriment of African Americans (pp. 10, 54).

The NACW did not acquiesce in this white-defined nationalism but contributed a vital counterpoint to it. Gendered in its outlook and also shaped by notions of

racial uplift and black manhood, the NACW espoused its own brand of patriotism, according to Morgan. For instance, evoking the preservation of George Washington's residence by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, it referred to its most important historic preservation project, the restoration of Frederick Douglass's home, Cedar Hill, as "the Black Mount Vernon" (p. 103).

The Spanish-American War, which furthered white supremacy by conflating nation, state, and the white race, led women's organizations to debate imperialism. Morgan points out that these debates reflected the clear-cut differences between black and white clubwomen's notions of nationalism and patriotism. Despite its misgivings about federal powers, the UDC joined the DAR in embracing loyalty to the federal government and viewing imperialism as manifest destiny. The two groups redefined the Anglo-Saxon race, and its women in particular, as the "makers of civilization" and advocates for Protestant Christianity (p. 65).

If the Spanish-American War re-energized white clubwomen's efforts to effect a white-based patriotism, World War I invigorated black women's activism. Even as the NACW was preserving Cedar Hill, black men's exclusion from combat and a ban on black women's overseas nursing radicalized a number of NACW members, weakening their devotion to the ideal of nation. While, in the context of war, they continued to identify themselves as committed Americans, fewer black clubwomen connected patriotism with obedience to the state that rejected their service. Black women managed to oppose racism while backing the war effort. In print and in parades, they joined black men in supporting soldiers and decrying military racism, using such phrases as "So treat us that we may love our country" (p. 121). The Red Cross's refusal to register black nurses for the war effort led some women to found the Women's War Relief Club. In a photograph of its members, Morgan sees a "patriotism ... articulated by their white uniforms, their white caps, and their solemnity" (pp. 120, 122). Some black women, influenced by Marcus Garvey, began developing a model of black nationalism as an alternative to American national identity and became more internationalist in their outlook. At the same time, the rise of a male-centered civil rights movement, which fused manhood, patriotism, and citizenship, took the wind out of the NACW sails.

Perhaps reacting to the war's reinforcement of women's cultural authority (one need only recall the Red Cross's wartime posters showing heroic white nurses)

and public activism, both black and white men reiterated the notion that women's loyalty to the nation was grounded in reproduction. White women successfully resisted this notion, bearing an average of just over two children each.

Male wartime activities also undermined and masculinized pro-Union women's nationalism. (I retain Morgan's use of the adjective "pro-Union" to refer to the DAR and WRC). Given the national emergency, increasing fears of Bolshevism after the Russian Revolution, government-sponsored patriotism initiatives, and a widespread conception among clubwomen of the military as the "linchpin of their safety," female nationalists imparted to men some of their moral and cultural authority and began "cheer[ing] from the sides" (pp. 106-107; this did not include one DAR member who presented the "menacing vision of '750,000 women already mobilized for machine-gun service in case of war'" against the Bolsheviks, as described by Morgan on page 133). Domesticity permeated clubwomen's work, which imparted political significance to ordinary items and actions. Clubwomen prided themselves on making clothing for soldiers and preserving food.

The Americanization of foreigners became another focus of clubwomen's efforts to foster nationalism and patriotism. One activity designed to "civilize" non-Anglo-Saxons was teaching immigrant women to cook, the better to wean them from alien foods like Limburger and sauerkraut. As DAR President Sarah Mitchell Guernsey put it, "[w]hat can you expect of the Americanism of the man" who "reeks of garlic?" (p. 104). Both black and white nationalist clubwomen did, however, continue to resist the notion that bearing children was their patriotic duty; they recast reproduction not as *bearing*, but as *raising*, patriotic children.

The anxiety engendered by the 1919 Red Scare, and the nation's increasing attention to securing the state militarily, further re-gendered nationalist women in the post-World War I period. Morgan shows how the DAR swung more sharply to the right in the early 1920s, when it began viewing the work of a number of more liberal women's organizations, such as the National Council of Women, as too radical and cut its ties to these groups. Redefining patriotism as an unquestioned support for the state, the DAR equated national security with the home. For instance, it preserved Teddy Roosevelt's ranching cabin; unlike its previous preservation efforts, which had honored both men's and women's labors, this endeavor enshrined a place "devoid of women['s]" presence (p.

135). The DAR also espoused a nationalism based on domesticity to avoid what it envisioned as “race suicide” and redoubled its Americanization efforts; as a DAR national convention document put it in 1919, Bolshevism found a “fertile ground ... among the great foreign population” (p. 132). At the same time, the Daughters deployed their cultural and moral authority to assail reformers and leftist radicals “more fervently and unconditionally than ever,” in part by participating in the government’s efforts to continue its surveillance of activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett in the postwar period (p. 127).

In contrast, many black clubwomen continued to link nationalism with racial justice. Some found a voice in, and many others sympathized with, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Despite their Garveyite sympathies, the UNIA’s members showed the dual nature of their patriotism by opening meetings with “The Star Spangled Banner,” as well as “The Universal Ethiopian Anthem.” Other clubwomen sought a more activist, yet still domestically oriented, role and followed NACW President Mary McLeod Bethune in supporting such reforms such as the Sheppard-Towner Act (1921), which provided funding for maternal and child health and welfare.

Morgan ends her story in the 1930s, when the conditions and perspectives that had fueled the “holy fire of patriotism” receded. The Great Depression and President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s leadership fused national identity to democracy’s promise, diminishing the sectional discord that had imperiled national unity. Notions like uplift and fear of immigrants were replaced by pluralism, and the belief in women’s moral superiority to men seemed stale and old-fashioned, redolent of Gilded Age and Progressive Era America.

The value of Morgan’s monograph lies in its challenge to the notion that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century clubwomen were universally active in progressive reform, feminism, and suffrage. To varying degrees, depending on national circumstances, clubwomen deferred to male authority as they developed and promulgated what it meant to be patriotic nationalists. Lest we think that these female nationalists’ contributions were of little relevance in later years, Morgan informs us otherwise. The virulent racism exhibited at Little Rock’s Central High School in 1959 was partially driven by the absorption of a sectional history constructed and disseminated largely by the UDC. Furthermore, the “rigid form of state-based nationalism” the DAR promulgated is hardly quaint, for it finds current voice in the unquestioning patriotism that equates dissent with support for terrorism (p. 131).

Notes

[1]. *Proceedings of a Conference of Governors* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 153, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?~ammem/consrvbib:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(amrv+vg16\)\):.](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?~ammem/consrvbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(amrv+vg16)):.)

[2]. Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Ladies, New Women: Race, Region, and Clubwomen in South Carolina, 1890-1930* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); John A. Simpson, *Edith D. Pope and Her Nashville Friends: Guardians of the Lost Cause in the Confederate Veteran* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003); Floris Barnett Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

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