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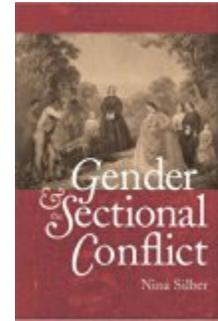
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nina Silber. *Gender and the Sectional Conflict*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xxi + 117 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3244-8.

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The Centrality of Gender and the Invisibility of Race in Civil War America

In 1894, a Confederate veteran ran a story about a mother and son attending a play about the Civil War. When the son asked his mother why the Yankees fought, she replied, “For the Union, darling.” A while later, as the orchestra played “Home Sweet Home,” the boy asked why the Confederates fought. The mother replied, “Do you hear what they are playing? That is what the Confederates fought for, darling.” The story concluded with the child declaring his political sympathies. “Oh mother,” he announced, “I will be a Confederate.” This anecdote neatly captures the themes explored by Nina Silber in the three lectures that she delivered as part of the Stephen and Janice Brose Distinguished Lecture Series in the Civil War Era at the Richards Civil War Era Center at Pennsylvania State University in 2006. Now published as *Gender and the Sectional Conflict*, these lectures explore themes of masculinity and nationalism, femininity and patriotism, and home and family in Civil War America. Offering a comparative analysis of the North and South, Silber convincingly argues that “gender was integral to northerners’ and southerners’ differing conceptions of why they fought and what the war was about” (p. xii).

Both building on and extending recent scholarship on gender and the Civil War, Silber examines the central role of gender ideology from secession through Reconstruction. Her first essay, “Gender and the ‘Cause,’” reveals that while both Union and Confederate soldiers highlighted their attachment to home and family, they did so in regionally distinctive ways. Southern soldiers closely identified Confederate nationalism with domestic

life; Northern soldiers, by contrast, prioritized the preservation of the Union over family relationships. “My duties to my country are of more importance now than my duty to you,” one Union soldier told his wife (p. 20). Silber connects Northern soldiers’ ability to separate national and family loyalties to the separation of home and work in the industrialized North. “The separate spheres ideology,” she suggests, by separating the domestic sphere from—and making it secondary to—men’s world of work and politics, “helped accustom Union soldiers to the ‘nation over home’ discourse of the Civil War era” (p. 24). Southern men, by contrast, “blended the causes of home and country and implied that while the nation may have been a cause worth fighting for, it meant nothing in the absence of homes and families” (p. xiv). As one North Carolina officer expressed it, “So long as we have wives, mothers, and sisters to fight for so long will this struggle continue” (p. 9).

Silber’s second essay builds on the first, exploring “the problem of women’s patriotism” at a time when most Americans, North and South, did not acknowledge the possibility that women might have political loyalties independent of those of their husbands. If Southern women, in accordance with patriarchal ideology, relied on their husbands and fathers to protect them, and if Northern women, consistent with the separate spheres model, remained isolated from political issues, how could women from either section be motivated to support the war, especially when war threatened the domestic life for which women were responsible? While the solution to

this conundrum remained elusive—both at the time and in current scholarship—by the end of the war, women’s political loyalties had acquired new significance as Southern women were required to take an oath of loyalty to the Union and Northern activists organized on behalf of emancipation and woman suffrage. Although Silber suggests that the “notion that women lack an independently patriotic perspective was ... especially pronounced in the South,” wartime Northern and Southern commentators frequently commented on Southern women’s strong support for the Confederacy, often making invidious comparisons between Southern women’s fierce defense of their cause and the lukewarm patriotism of Northern women (p. 40). Silber offers an interesting interpretation of both praise for and criticism of women’s patriotism, proposing that praise for female patriotism functioned to mute class tensions, while criticism of women’s waning enthusiasm served as a metonym for a critique of class divisions. In the Confederacy, Catherine Edmondston pronounced: “Never was known such unanimity of action amongst all classes” (p. 43). Meanwhile, Northern newspapers sharply criticized fictional characters like “Mrs. Shoddy,” elite women who allegedly spent their ill-gained wartime profits on luxury goods (p. 49).

In her third and final chapter, Silber compares the memory-making work of Northern and Southern women. For Southern white women, she contends, celebrating the Lost Cause constituted “the single most important springboard into the public arena” (p. 95). By contrast, “Unionist women were strikingly silent and unseen in postwar commemoration” (p. 83). Confederate women were more central to commemorative activities for both practical and ideological reasons. In burying the Confederate dead and providing material support for

their widows and orphans, “southern white women did for Confederate soldiers what the federal government was doing ... on behalf of Union soldiers” (p. 73). Perhaps more importantly, however, Southern white women built on the wartime tradition of highlighting women and families as central to the Confederate cause. Silber suggests that the highly visible role of white women in Confederate memory-making reflected “a desire to portray the southern cause as moral, virtuous, and righteous”; at the same time, placing white women and families at center stage was critical to be “policy of forgetfulness” that allowed Americans in both sections of the country to elide race in the memory of the Civil War (pp. 75, xix). African American women attempted to call attention to slavery and emancipation as war issues and to their own role in the conflict by joining the Woman’s Relief Corps (the women’s auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic) and by publishing memoirs and novels about black women’s contributions to the Union. Ultimately, however, Silber contends that the same notions of gender that underlay Northerners’ and Southerners’ interpretations of the war effort “conspired in the postwar period to erase the memories of northern women’s wartime contributions and to focus exaggerated attention on the experiences of southern white women”—and to ignore African Americans entirely (p. 98).

Unfortunately, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* perpetuates the invisibility of African Americans in the American Civil War at the same time that it calls attention to this lacuna in both Civil War commemoration and current scholarship. Nonetheless, this insightful and thought-provoking volume is a valuable addition to the burgeoning literature on gender and the Civil War.

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