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Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor. *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 253 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4144-0.

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## Unraveling the Threads of Women's Commercial Lives

Newport tavern owner Abigail Stoneman might have tracked the debts of her patrons on playing cards, but she hardly dealt in the world of commerce as if it were a trivial game. Instead, she turned those cards into promissory notes and later used them as court evidence to sue her debtor. Such savvy and resourceful women fill the pages of Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor's ambitious new monograph, mingling with each other across lines of rank, race, and region. By detailing the growth of women's everyday economic activities in the Revolutionary era, *The Ties That Buy* joins a handful of recent historical studies that challenge and complicate the persistent narrative of women who fell victim to the rise of market capitalism and its accompanying depreciation of women's economic behavior. More significantly, it shatters the illusion of commercial port cities as composed exclusively of Adam Smith's rational, self-interested, male individuals. Instead, Hartigan-O'Connor presents a series of interconnected snapshots of female entrepreneurs, middle-women, service workers, and consumers who shaped a thriving and tense, but mostly collaborative commercial network that stretched from Newport, Rhode Island, to Charleston, South Carolina, and well across the Atlantic. These women played as central a role in the expanding drama of late-eighteenth-century urban commercial growth as the male merchants who gathered at coffeehouses and exchanges.

Rather than untangling one knot of women's activity within this vast economic web, Hartigan-O'Connor

bravely attempts to unravel them all. Each chapter focuses on a unique aspect of women's commercial culture—from the economic arrangements of domestic units, to women's labor and use of money in the Atlantic economy, to their consumer behavior in the new republic. Importantly, Hartigan-O'Connor's interest lies in women's relationships to the broader commercial culture, not in their relationships to free white men. Instead of focusing exclusively on political tracts or elite discourse that characterized commerce as a masculine domain, she scours women's manuscripts, account books, and court records to extract women's lived experiences in the rapidly expanding economy. Shopkeepers meet boardinghouse keepers in her monograph, as do creditors and debtors, patriotic spinners, washerwomen, "shoppers," and enslaved market vendors. All women, she argues—whether free or enslaved, wealthy or poor—stitched together the dynamic web of commerce that composed the eighteenth-century economy.

The most critical link in this commercial network proves to be the "houseful," a term that Hartigan-O'Connor deftly employs to explain the diverse relationships that uniquely characterized urban domestic living arrangements. These relationships often developed out of temporary economic need rather than familial ties, thus setting them apart from rural relationships encapsulated within the more familiar term, "household." Newport housekeepers took in a varied stream of boarders to make ends meet, just as Charleston women temporarily

incorporated enslaved blacks into their homes for economic gain. In both places, working women also actively sought out such arrangements, exchanging their labor for shelter, sustenance, or wages. Precisely because such economic motives often dictated the shape of housefuls, these domestic units thus mirrored the broader market culture, proving to be sites of economic negotiation, cooperation, and contestation.

As women's economic activities radiated out from these housefuls into the larger commercial community, so too did the social relationships that defined them. Indeed, the language of individualism and self-interest crafted by eighteenth-century political economists never accurately portrayed the reality of commercial life. Rather, the economy was an "embedded" one, Hartigan-O'Connor convincingly argues, in which "commerce was shot through with other concerns" such as affection, familial obligations, and gendered and racial ideas (p. 192). Newport women carefully researched and haggled over the price of cranberries, for example, only to send them as gifts to their Charleston relatives. Mutual obligations and relations of dependence marked countless other transactions as well, weaving men and women together in lines of shared family credit and debt.

The complex interplay of social relationships that defined the world of commerce emerges most poignantly when Hartigan-O'Connor details the collaborative consumer networks that stretched from the home, through the streets, and into the market or shop. Along the way she reveals a host of "proxy shoppers" in the form of enslaved women, female relatives, friends, and servants who took instructions, negotiated deals, exchanged cash, used credit, and secured material goods for others. Such women clearly filled indispensable roles in the expansion of commercial activity, just as the male factors who negotiated on behalf of Southern cotton planters. By illuminating these middle-women and the lengthy channels of communication that "shoppers" passed through before ever approaching the shop counter, the *Ties That Buy* cleverly shifts our attention away from the typical narrative focus on the point of contact between vendor and consumer.

Considering their vast participation in these extensive economic networks, Hartigan-O'Connor's women hardly emerge as victims during the birth of market capitalism. Rather, they act in critical and serious ways to expand commercial life. Detailing collaborative shopping networks, for instance, allows Hartigan-O'Connor to succinctly explode the myth of the leisurely, frivolous

female consumer that saturated contemporary popular culture. So too does she question the narratives of those historians who have accepted the myth at face value. Other women emerge who meticulously manage their accounts in record books or carefully calculate the value of their washing services, while some literally juggle multiple purses of foreign and domestic bank notes, cash, coinage, and credit slips—a testament to their financial acumen during a moment of shifting currencies and values. Even the Revolutionary War did not prove to be a long-term economic setback; in fact, it simply drove many women deeper into the port cities' commercial life. The infamous popular literature that admonished middling white women for extravagant spending in the new nation had little effect. Rather than working to separate women from a masculine commercial sphere, advice literature empowered women as thrifty money managers in a dangerously expanding market economy.

Yet, power is real for Hartigan-O'Connor, and thus her female actors are not invulnerable heroines. Precisely because they were embedded in the economy, women faced meaningful restrictions based on rank, gender, and race that shaped their economic behavior. Enslaved black women, for example, might enjoy autonomy by marketing goods on their owner's behalf and later use part of their earnings to buy fabric for a head-dress. Yet they could be sold as easily as the commodities they vended and purchased, thus marring the liberating potential of consumption or the power of "consumer choice." Free white women fared better overall, but still bumped against the obstacles of coverture and other legal practices that linked them to men's estates for better or for worse. This pervasive inequality that structured social, political, and economic life, however, leads one to wonder whether Hartigan-O'Connor downplays the tensions within these economic networks in favor of presenting a more collaborative, harmonious view. Indeed, "collaborative" seems an ill-fitting adjective for a shopping network that stretched through the institution of slavery, especially considering that an enslaved proxy shopper might literally be beaten if she did not secure the right goods at the right price.

In the end, Hartigan-O'Connor certainly fulfills her promise of offering a series of portraits of women's everyday economic activity that constituted the threads of commercial life in Revolutionary-era port cities. If anyone should still doubt that women played a central role in the economic expansion of the early republic, they need only to read this fine and important book to overcome their skepticism. *The Ties That Buy* could be more grace-

fully written perhaps, but the difficult feat of stitching together the economic lives of so many women across lines of freedom and slavery, race and rank in two distinct locales surely can take a stylistic toll. Hartigan-O'Connor's diligent work and meticulous research has more than paid off. She has successfully provided us with

not only an invaluable study of the intersections between economic and social life in early America, but the most complete portrait of a sophisticated, collaborative model of urban commercial life to date-one that happened to have sophisticated women from all ranks at its core.

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