A New Perspective

Southern Women's Cultural History from the Civil War to Civil Rights

Edited by

Priscilla Cortelyou Little & Robert C. Vaughan

A New Perspective

Southern Women's Cultural History from the Civil War to Civil Rights

Edited by

Priscilla Cortelyou Little & Robert C. Vaughan

This volume is published in conjunction with a conference held at the
National Museum of Women in the Arts, May 10-11, 1988, Washington, D.C.

CREDITS

Design: Sally Wright
Typesetting: Elaine Melton
Copy Editor: Kristen Rembold
Printing: University Printing Services, University of Virginia

QUOTATION CREDITS

Anne Spencer's poem *Creed* from *Time's Unfading Garden*, by J. Lee Greene, Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Credits for *Queena Stovall* and for *Flower Sellers* from *Share of Honor*, Kym Rice, curator.

Alice Walker's quote from her essay "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," in *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens*, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Lovanovich, 1983: 42-59.

COVER CREDITS

Flight, painting, oil on canvas, by Marie Hull, 36" x 42", collection of Lee and Pup McCarty, Marigold, Mississippi. Marie Hull (1890-1980) was an extremely productive artist, and active in local – Jackson, MS – regional and national artistic activities. This painting was published in Malcolm Norwood's and Elias Virginia McGehee's and William Hayne's book, *The Art of Marie Hull*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1975.

"And all the wild birds this year should know
I cherish their freedom to come and go"

Anne Spencer

Table of Contents

Editor's Preface

The papers in this volume were compiled from a conference held on May 10-11, 1988 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Planned by a committee representing fourteen southern state humanities councils, the conference brought together over 175 people from twenty-one states to discuss southern women's cultural history from the Civil War to the Civil Rights era. Attendees included scholars, artists, composers, community leaders, teachers, museum directors, educational administrators, media producers, and state council board and staff members.

The purpose of the conference was twofold: to examine women's contributions to one of the most important periods of southern history, 1860-1960, and to plan future humanities programs based on new, emerging research for out-of-school adult audiences. The planning committee asked historians, musicologists, art historians, and literary critics to provide a framework for the period and to suggest neglected areas of research that should be explored in the future. To ensure that these objectives would continue to be pursued, the committee asked workshop leaders and participants to propose specific ways that recent scholarship could reach a wider public audience through the media, schools, libraries, and museums.

Overall, this effort is viewed as a beginning—or, as conference speaker Thadious Davis termed it, "a rediscovery"—examining how southern women lived, worked, organized, and expressed themselves. Even as the committee planned the two-day event, it was aware that subjects such as the role of women in education and religion, the Native American contribution to the South, and a whole host of other topics could not be covered in the brief time permitted. The intention, rather, was to focus on the feminist movement, women's work and family life, women's literature, and women in the arts. Although this was a daunting task in and of itself, speakers rose to the challenge, providing us with an outstanding framework.

Conference Background

In 1985, southern state humanities councils met in Charleston, West Virginia, to discuss collaborative projects. At that meeting participants agreed that, although the South was divided into many regions with distinct characteristics and populations, it retained many traditions, cultures, and interests in common and shared a common history. Following this meeting a committee consisting of staff from Virginia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, and the District of Columbia drafted an outline for a conference that would address women's contributions to the South from 1860 to 1960.

The committee chose this particular 100-year span because it contains a rich history of cultural transformations that have a great deal of relevance for contemporary men and women. This era, framed at beginning and end by disruptive confusion and violence, offers perspectives on how women lived with hardships and new opportunities.

During the Civil War and its aftermath, women and men were threatened by poverty, disease, and family disruption and challenged to examine traditional values, established networks, and personal and public responsibilities. Unlike their northern counterparts, southern women had to face the devastation of the land on which the war was fought as well as other post-war deprivations. The South as a region not only experienced military defeat, but pervasive poverty and displacement of home and community. According to historian Anne Firor Scott, in the South women outnumbered men throughout the Reconstruction period. "The 1870 census recorded 25,000 more women than men in North Carolina, 36,000 in Georgia, 15,000 in Virginia, and 8,000 in South Carolina."[1]

At the end of the period, in the 1960s, tensions and cooperation between black and white women reached new levels as women participated in the civil rights movement, the sit-ins, the bus boycotts, and other non-violent protests. Historian Suzanne Lebsock has observed:

> The civil rights movement did not eliminate racism, but it did do away with some of the most visible and degrading forms of discrimination. Moreover, the movement brought about a renewed commitment to equality, an appreciation of the damage done by discrimination, and a new willingness to question old ideas

about the worth of people who looked different. On every count, women as a group had a great deal to learn from this. In the middle 1960s they started to apply the lesson of the civil rights movement to themselves.[2]

Women's Studies and Public Programs

Fortunately, in 1988, it is not necessary to justify the importance of focusing a major regional conference on southern women's cultural history. During the last fifteen years, the public and the academy have accepted the premise that scholarship about women is a valid enterprise in the best humanities tradition.

Both within and outside the academy, scholars have "rediscovered" sources that provide new insights into women's lives. Using women's letters, diaries, artwork, musical compositions, public documents such as wills, and legal information as primary source material, scholars have been stimulated to pose new questions. Who were these women? How did they live? What was their contribution to the culture?

Excited by these questions, academic and independent scholars have created a new environment that has had a profound effect on humanities research. In 1987, for example, historian Mary Beth Norton observed in the *New York Times Magazine* that "currently, well over 1,000 women and men in the United States work almost exclusively in women's history." Similarly, Anne Firor Scott and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall have noted, "the efforescence of scholarship was largely the work of young scholars, mostly women, who had flocked into graduate programs in the 1960s."[3]

By now the movement in the academy has matured, passing into its second or third transformation. It is currently possible to identify or choose a particular perspective through which to view the emerging topics, whether they be regional-, racial-, class-, or gender-related. Debate and discussion has been refined allowing people to choose many different approaches. Recently, Catharine Stimpson observed:

> Since the 1960's, feminism has split again and again until it has become feminisms, a set of groups, each with its own ideology, identity, and agenda. . . . No matter how much they might upset each other, no matter how much they might pull apart, they can still link together, as if they were the fingers of two hands, one right, one left, both active. A feminist regard of and sometimes regard for, cultures can display that interplay of division and unity.[4]

The South

While it is gratifying to know that new research on women is rapidly growing, it is also important to note that, until recently, scholars have neglected research on southern women. In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, two scholars observed, "Perhaps, however, this neglect is understandable, given the Northeast's predominance in the historical profession and the constraints on women's educational and professional opportunities in the South."[5] Opportunities for research at southern universities and colleges lag behind those in other sections of the country. In the late 60s and early 70s, southern universities and colleges missed crucial funding opportunities that established major centers for research on women in the northern, the midwestern, and the western parts of the country. Bonnie Thornton Dill, Director of the Memphis State University Research Center, brought this point to the conference members' attention by relating that between 1974 and 1981, when the Ford Foundation was funding core programs for women's research centers around the country, only two, Memphis State and the University of North Carolina/Duke, were located in the South.[6]

Both within and outside the academy, scholars have "rediscovered" sources that provide new insights into women's lives.

Dill emphasized, however, that although the southern centers were small in number, they were dedicated to a unified objective. "The common theme that characterizes the southern centers is the emphasis on studying women in the context of race, class and gender."[7] This particular intellectual focus of southern centers for research on women is important to note for it reflects the emergence of the region and its particular assets. It also offers new insights for the country as a whole as scholars explore experiences of women. Women living through the heady 1960s and 1970s experienced a women's movement that was not inclusive of all classes and races. "Sisterhood," as it is often called, was divided into divisions based on race and class. As Bonnie Thornton Dill has observed:

> Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American women of all classes, as well as many working-class women have not readily identified themselves as sisters of the white middle-class women who have been in the forefront of the movement. . . . Historically, as well as currently, Black women have felt called upon to choose between their commitments to feminism and the struggles against racial injustice. Clearly they are victims of both forms of oppression and most in need of encouragement and support in waging battles on both fronts.[8]

The importance of establishing more research centers for the study of southern women cannot be overemphasized. By offering research opportunities and publications, and by serving as clearing houses for all who are searching

for bibliographies and sources, the centers at southern universities have already given scholars and the general public an opportunity to participate in the remarkable upsurge in women's research.

Women's studies journals and publications, *Sage, Iris,* and the internationally-known *Signs,* located in the South, have begun to address the problem. Conference panelist Jean O'Barr, editor of *Signs,* commented that "having an international feminist journal located in the South was significant for the following reasons: editors attend regional conferences; southern scholars are used extensively as reviewers of manuscripts, book reviews, essays, and conference reports; and continual solicitation of new material is sought at regional meetings of Southern Women Historians, Southeastern Women's Studies Association, the South Atlantic Modern Languages Association Women's Caucus, and other regional organizations." Finally O'Barr informed conference members that "we anticipate a special 1990 issue on the intersection of race, class and gender in which the Southern content will be high."[9]

State Humanities Councils and the Women's Movement

A rediscovery of our own history must also include the happy partnership between state humanities councils and public programs focused on women's issues. In contrast to the southern universities which, for the most part, have been involved in women's programs only since the middle 1980s, the southern state humanities councils have been supporting research for fifteen years. Founded in the early 1970s, they have provided funding and leadership in all aspects of southern women's cultural history. As early as 1974, state councils unencumbered by large academic hierarchies commissioned new research and located qualified scholars from the academy to lead literature discussion groups, to write historical narratives, to edit literary indexes, and generally to supervise hundreds of projects in libraries, museums, and secondary schools.

Women and some men flocked to these public programs on the Constitution, the family, women's literature, and other subjects, eager to discuss in a non-partisan way the values of the individual's and the community's responsibility for change, and the possibilities for the future. The humanities forums encouraged women and men to study the Bill of Rights, to analyze comparative cultures, and to re-examine religious traditions. Jane Hood, now Nebraska Council director, observed as early as 1984:

> The flowering of new scholarship in Women's Studies coincided with the establishment and growth of the state humanities councils. . . . Women, whose organizational skills had been honed through years of volunteer activity, had willingly donated that experience to ensure the success of complicated projects.[10]

Women like Pat Bates of Vermont, for instance, worked with the staff of the Vermont Humanities Council to organize literature programs in public libraries that became the model for the American Library Association's "Let's Talk About It" series and thousands of other successful literature series promoted in every state.

Excited by the intellectual quality of the programs led by humanities professors in the 1970s and early 1980s, many women entered or re-entered college programs, finished advanced degrees, or simply took courses, many of them in the liberal arts, through continuing education offerings. Scholars interested in interdisciplinary topics, such as those involved in women's history programs, brought their particular knowledge to the public in an understandable framework. The overwhelming majority of presentations were carefully crafted, stimulating, and well delivered. Community audiences flocked to the programs because they knew that they would be intellectually stimulating, and that participants would have a chance to discuss important issues with the speakers. Consulting scholars volunteered for planning meetings, prepared bibliographies, drew up discussion questions, and in general did everything possible to make the programs a success.

Conclusion

The two-day conference that formed the basis for this volume was successful in discovering the state of scholarship on southern women's cultural history from 1860 to 1960. Realizing how much more there is to accomplish, academic and public participants—inspired by the lectures, discussions, and conversations—came away with new topics to explore. Women's contributions in art and music, seldom included in academic conferences, added another dimension to the understanding of the period. Workshop leaders outlined new programs for museum exhibits, secondary school teachers' seminars, and library literature series; and they assembled a southern state speaker's bureau that will be useful in planning future humanities programs. Many new initiatives for public programs are already underway in the southern states. Conference panelist Peggy Prenshaw presented such an impressive array of women's cultural history projects in every southern state that it caused speaker Scott to suggest that this important cultural activity should be documented for the future.

The planning committee was pleased that it provided a model for substantive research that will be useful to other sections of the country and to the larger public. Finally, the southern councils, in sponsoring the symposium, have reaffirmed their commitment to highlighting the contribution of feminist scholarship as an integrated part of the humanities tradition.

Priscilla Cortelyou Little

[1] Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

[2] Suzanne Lebsock, *A Share of Honour: Virginia Women 1600-1945* (Virginia: Virginia Women's Cultural History Project, 1984), 145. Reference cites Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots* of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: 1979).

[3] Anne Firor Scott and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Women in the South," *Interpreting Southern History*, John Bales and Evelyn T. Nolen, eds., (Louisiana State University Press), 454-509.

[4] Catharine Stimpson, *Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces* (New York and London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1988), Introduction, p. xiii.

[5] Scott and Hall, "Women in the South," *Interpreting Southern History*, 458.

[6] This figure does not include those centers established in the District of Columbia. For further information about this see Mariam Chamerlain, "A Period of Remarkable Growth: Womens' Studies Research Centers," *Change*, April 1982.

[7] Bonnie Thornton Dill, conference address, "A New Perspective: Southern Women's Cultural History from the Civil War to Civil Rights," Washington, D.C., 11 May 1988.

[8] Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Race, Class and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* Vol. 9-10 (1983-1984): 131 and 137.

[9] Jean O'Barr, panel presentation at conference, "A New Perspective: Southern Women's Cultural History from the Civil War to Civil Rights," Washington, D.C., 11 May 1988. Jean O'Barr also announced that a special issue of the journal was selected by the American Association of Publishers as the best single issue of a scholarly journal in 1987.

[10] Jane Hood, "Women and the Humanities: A Case Study," *Federation Reports: The Journal of the State Humanities Councils*, Vol. VII, 3 (May/June 1984): 8.

Acknowledgements

The symposium's success depended heavily on the support of the southern state humanities councils and the other planning committee members: Ann Henderson, Michael Sartisky, and Ramona Lumpkin shaped the program and in general brought the conference into being. Special thanks must also go to Ann Radice, Director, National Museum of Women in the Arts and Mary Sullivan, Director, Special Programs, for co-sponsoring the conference in the Museum's surroundings. Everyone who attended found the spacious beauty of the building, the permanent exhibits, and the portable exhibit, "A Share of Honour," conducive to the conference's goals.

We wish to thank the University of Virginia, particularly Sharon Davie, Women's Studies; Marion Peavy, Director of Development; and President Robert O'Neil for their cooperation and support. Most of all, we wish to thank the Jessie Ball duPont Religious, Charitable, and Educational Fund for its generous contribution that both endorsed the value of the project and supported it financially. Executive Director George Penick was most helpful throughout the planning.

We wish also to thank all panel members, responders, and state council members who assisted throughout. Without them, the interaction between scholars and the public would not have been complete. They contributed to our analysis of information and challenged us to examine the data carefully without glossing over difficult issues such as racial tensions, white women's involvement in the institution of slavery, and the defeat of the ERA in the South. We wish especially to thank Peggy Prenshaw, Jean O'Barr, Anne Imelda-Radice, Bonnie Thornton Dill, Sharon Harley, Sharon Davie, Kym Rice, D. Antoinette Handy, and Phyllis Palmer.

We also acknowledge with gratitude the work of the D.C. Community Humanities Council – Fran Cary, Lil Stringfellow, Bill Link, and Jeff Schmidt – who made the local arrangements work smoothly. In producing the papers, we are indebted to Sally Wright, Coordinator of Design and Production and to Elaine Melton, Phototypesetting Specialist, UVA School of Continuing Education; to Cynthia Foote, University Press of Virginia; to Kristen Rembold, Editor, *Iris: A Journal About Women;* and to the Florida Endowment for the Humanities, led by Executive Director Ann Henderson, for their generous financial contribution for this publication. Finally, we are profoundly grateful to colleagues at the Virginia Foundation for their tireless assistance with this entire project and publication: The Board of Directors, David Bearinger, Andrew Wyndham, Susan Coleman, Hope Herring, and Sarah Jane Jones.

Sponsors

The Southern State Humanities Councils
- *Alabama Humanities Foundation*
- *Arkansas Endowment for the Humanities*
- *D.C. Community Humanities Council*
- *Florida Endowment for the Humanities*
- *Georgia Endowment for the Humanities*
- *Kentucky Humanities Council*
- *Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities*
- *Mississippi Committee for the Humanities*
- *North Carolina Humanities Council*
- *South Carolina Committee for the Humanities*
- *Tennessee Humanities Council*
- *Texas Committee for the Humanities*
- *Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy*
- *Humanities Foundation of West Virginia*

The Jessie Ball duPont Religious, Charitable, and Educational Fund

The National Museum of Women in the Arts

Women's Studies, University of Virginia

Virginia Center for the Humanities