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RACE GENDER & WORK

A MULTICULTURAL
ECONOMIC HISTORY
OF WOMEN IN
THE UNITED STATES

TERESA L. AMOTT &
JULIE A. MATTHAEI

RACE, GENDER, AND WORK

**A Multicultural Economic History of
Women in the United States**

Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei

South End Press, Boston, MA

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the final months of writing this book, we came to see the project as the "book factory," because the book, like any manufactured product, owes its shape to the many hands and minds who collaborated to bring it into being. Every product has its inventors, its engineers, its skilled craftspeople, and its inspectors, as well as those who manufactured the inputs that went into producing it. There are many who have worked on or otherwise contributed to this project whom we would like to thank.

The book had its origins in a collective writing project undertaken by the Economic Literacy Project of Women for Economic Justice, a Boston-based organization which seeks to empower low-income women and women of color through a variety of organizing, advocacy, and educational projects. The Economic Literacy Project, started in 1980, is made up of feminist social scientists who provide training workshops, public speaking, and consulting services to groups working for social change. Over six years ago, the group began writing a pamphlet to address the then-popular concept of the feminization of poverty in a way that also took into account race and class oppression. Many women worked on the pamphlet, and Caren Grown, Elaine McCrate, Gail Shields, Pamela Sparr, and Nan Wiegiersma each wrote substantial portions. However, the subject proved too complex for large-group writing, and, in 1985, we took on the project, eventually expanding the pamphlet into this book-length work. Women for Economic Justice provided critical resources and inspiration at the pamphlet stage of the project, and the organization will receive some of the proceeds from the sale of the book.

Over the years, many of our thoughts on the interconnections of race, gender, sexual preference, class, and nationality have been formed in discussions and study with our sisters in the Marxist Feminist 1 group. The analysis and sisterhood we continue to find in that group have informed all of our intellectual and political work. We are also indebted to the countless researchers on women whose painstaking work has opened up women's myriad experiences to our view, particularly the women of color who have insisted that the method as well as the content of women's studies requires radical transformation. The work of the Memphis State University Center for Research on Women, especially their bibliography, *Women of Color and*

Southern Women: A Bibliography of Social Science Research, was particularly helpful and inspirational.¹

At both the early and later stages of this project, we have drawn on the talents and perseverance of many research assistants. Betsy Wright, of Women for Economic Justice, urged us to incorporate the stories of struggle and resistance into our analysis of the political economy of women's work, as well as uncovered many such stories; her insight and efforts immeasurably enriched the final product. We are also indebted to Michelle Anglade, Trina Haque, Tricia Horn, Jennifer Johnston, Chris McGee, Christine McRae, Sarah Pryor, and Gwynne Wiatrowski for research assistance which often involved important new insights or suggestions. In the final stages of the "book factory," Kim Cuddy and Jenn Kapuscik took responsibility for the difficult and laborious tasks of checking sources for the footnotes and bibliography, and called our attention to gaps and errors in the text. Loren Eng and Diane Matukaitis navigated us through a century of Census data, compiling tables and figures which were essential to the project with great care and patience.

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Since we first met 12 years ago, we have collaborated in so much political work and so many writing projects that it is now nearly impossible to attribute any portion of this work to one or the other, and only alphabetical accident puts Teresa's name ahead of Julie's. We literally wrote most of the first draft while sitting in the same space, in almost continual conversation, and most of the second draft on the phone. In this process, our style of collaboration has been tested by disagreement and exhaustion, and strengthened by commitment and humor. This book is, above all, a product of our friendship, a friendship which remains its own best reward.

CONTENTS

List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	x
Preface and Acknowledgments . . . . .	.xi
PART I: RACE, GENDER, AND WOMEN'S WORKS	
Chapter 1: Introduction	3
Chapter 2: Race, Class, Gender, and Women's Works: A Conceptual Framework	11
PART II: HISTORIES OF WOMEN'S WORKS	
Chapter 3: I Am the Fire of Time: American Indian Women	31
Chapter 4: The Soul of <i>Tierra Madre</i> : Chicana Women	63
Chapter 5: Whatever Your Fight, Don't Be Ladylike: European American Women	95
Chapter 6: We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: African American Women	141
Chapter 7: Climbing Gold Mountain: Asian American Women.	193
Chapter 8: <i>Yo Misma Fui Mi Ruta</i> : Puerto Rican Women	257
PART III: TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S WORKS	
Chapter 9: The Growth of Wage Work	291
Chapter 10: The Transformation of Women's Wage Work	315
Chapter 11: Seeking Beyond History	349
Notes	357
Appendix A: United States Census Sources	395
Appendix B: Definitions of Major Occupational Categories	399
Appendix C: Labor Force Participation Rates, 1900-1980, and Share of Families Which Were Female-Headed, 1960-1980	403
Appendix D: Some Problems of Comparability Between Census Years	405
Index	407

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1-1:	United States Population by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1980 . . .	8
Table 3-1:	Occupational Distribution of American Indian Women Workers, 1900-1980	48
Table 3-2:	U.S. Policy Toward American Indians	53
Table 4-1:	Occupational Distribution of Chicana Workers, 1930-1980	76
Table 5-1:	Occupational Distribution of European American Women Workers, 1900-1980	125
Table 6-1:	Occupational Distribution of African American Women Workers, 1900-1980	158
Table 6-2:	Unemployment Rates by Race-Ethnicity, Gender, and Age, 1972-1988	181
Table 6-3:	Relative Concentrations of African American Women in Selected White-Male-Dominated Occupations, 1970 and 1980	189
Table 7-1:	Occupational Distribution of Chinese American Women Workers, 1900-1980	207
Table 7-2:	Occupational Distribution of Japanese American Women Workers, 1900-1980	220
Table 7-3:	Occupational Distribution of Filipina American Workers, 1930-1980	247
Table 7-4:	Relative Concentrations of Women in Selected White-Male-Dominated Occupations, 1980	251
Table 8-1:	Occupational Distribution of Island Puerto Rican Women Workers, 1899-1980	264
Table 8-2:	Occupational Distribution of U.S. Puerto Rican Women Workers, 1960-1980	276
Table 8-3:	Labor Force Participation, Unemployment, and Employment-to-Population Ratios in Puerto Rico, by Gender, 1970-1985	278
Table 9-1:	Gainful Employment Rates, by Gender and Racial-Ethnic Group, 1920	299
Table 9-2:	Women's Gainful Employment Rates by Marital Status and Domesticity Rates, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1920	300

Table 9-3:	Women's Labor Force Participation Rates by Marital Status and Domesticity Rates, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1920 and 1980 . . . . .	.303
Table 9-4:	Labor Force Participation Rates, by Gender and Race-Ethnicity, 1920 and 1980 . . . . .	.305
Table 9-5:	Time Spent per Day on Unpaid and Paid Work, by Women and Men, 1960s and 1970s . . . . .	.308
Table 9-6:	Women's Median Incomes, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1980 . . . . .	.310
Table 9-7:	Poverty Rates of Female-Headed Families, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1970 and 1980 . . . . .	.313
Table 9-8:	Child Support by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1987 . . . . .	.314
Table 10-1:	Racial-Ethnic and Gender Composition of the Labor Force, 1900 and 1980 . . . . .	.316
Table 10-2:	Private Household Workers, by Gender and Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900 . . . . .	.323
Table 10-3:	Share of Employed Women Working in Private Household Service, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980 . . . . .	.324
Table 10-4:	Share of Employed Women Working in Service Occupations (Other than Private Household), by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980 . . . . .	.325
Table 10-5:	The Distribution of Protective Service Jobs, 1900 and 1980 . . . . .	.327
Table 10-6:	Women in Agriculture, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900 . . . . .	.329
Table 10-7:	Share of Employed Women Working in Agriculture, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980 . . . . .	.330
Table 10-8:	Share of Employed Women Working in Manufacturing, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980 . . . . .	.331
Table 10-9:	Share of Employed Women Working in Clerical Occupations, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980 . . . . .	.334
Table 10-10:	Share of Employed Women Working in Professional and Technical Occupations, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980 . . . . .	.338
Table 10-11:	Definition of Labor Market Segments, 1980 . . . . .	.339
Table 10-12:	Distribution of Workers Across Labor Market Segments, by Racial-Ethnic Group and Gender, 1980 . . . . .	.340
Table 10-13:	Median Incomes of Full-Time, Full-Year Workers, by Gender and Race-Ethnicity, 1980 . . . . .	.342
Table 10-14:	Unemployment Rates, by Race-Ethnicity and Gender, 1980 . . . . .	.344
Table 10-15:	Per Capita Income and Poverty Rates, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1980 . . . . .	.345

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1:	The Sexual Division of Labor	15
Figure 2-2:	The Social Construction of Race-Ethnicity	20
Figure 2-3:	Racial Hierarchies	21
Figure 3-1:	The Distribution of American Indian and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	60
Figure 4-1:	The Distribution of Chicana/o and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	87
Figure 5-1:	The Distribution of European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	137
Figure 6-1:	Labor Force Participation Rates of African American and European American Women, 1900-1980	166
Figure 6-2:	The Distribution of African American and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	188
Figure 7-1:	The Distribution of Chinese American and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	216
Figure 7-2:	The Distribution of Japanese American and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	234
Figure 7-3:	The Distribution of Filipina/o American and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	248
Figure 8-1:	The Distribution of Island Puerto Rican, U.S. Puerto Rican, and European American Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980	286
Figure 9-1:	From Non-Capitalist to Capitalist Labor Systems	293
Figure 9-2:	Women's Labor Force Participation Rates, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1900-1980	306
Figure 9-3:	Female-Headed Families as Share of All Families, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1960-1980	312
Figure 10-1:	The Distribution of Women Workers across Labor Market Segments, by Racial-Ethnic Group, 1980	347

Part One: Race, Gender, and Women's Works

INTRODUCTION

Domestic servants descended from African slaves, Chinese women sold into the U.S. prostitution market, middle-class European American homemakers, and Puerto Rican feminist union organizers in the early-1900s. It seems the work experiences of women in the United States are so varied and multi-dimensional that a common history is beyond our grasp. Yet, the work lives of women in the United States have always been interconnected: in a very real sense, the lives of any one group of women have been dependent upon the lives of others, just as they have been dependent upon those of men (and vice versa). Unfortunately, the ties which have joined us have rarely been mutual, equal, or cooperative; instead, our interdependence has been characterized by domination and exploitation. American Indian women's lost lands were the basis for European immigrant wealth. The domestic work of African American and poor European immigrant women, along with the labors of their husbands, sons, and daughters in factories, underwrote the lavish lifestyles of upper-class European American women. The riches enjoyed by the wives and children of Mexican American *hacienda* owners were created by the poverty of displaced and landless Indians and Chicanas. And U.S. political and economic domination of the Philippines and Puerto Rico allowed U.S. women to maintain higher standards of living, and encouraged the migration of impoverished Filipina and Puerto Rican women to U.S. shores.

In this book, we attempt the difficult task of tracing women's work lives through the dynamic and complicated process which economists have called capitalist development. In the last five centuries, Native Americans have been joined by millions of immigrant women and men of diverse racial-ethnic and economic backgrounds. These immigrants came—some voluntarily, others at gunpoint—into a variety of different economic niches, including slavery, indentured servitude, contract labor, self-employment, and wage work. The United States expanded across Mexico and incorporated Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Hawaii. And a fledgling economic system of profit-motivated production for the market, based on wage labor, grew into the dominant economic and social force determining women's work lives, not only

in the United States, but in the world.

Our goal in this volume is three-fold. First, to show the multiplicity and diversity of women's work contributions, both paid and unpaid, to U.S. economic history. Second, to lay out the interconnections and interdependencies involved in this multiplicity of works, with special focus on processes of exploitation and oppression and on the struggles of women and men for survival and against economic injustice. Third, to highlight major transformations in the gender, racial-ethnic, and class hierarchies accompanying the historical process of capitalist economic expansion, as well as the diverse ways in which these transformations have affected women's works. This is a broad project indeed, and one which we can only very partially achieve in this volume; we hope that our effort will encourage further research along these lines as well as further activism.

The book is organized into three parts. We begin in Part I with an introduction to our methodology and to our conceptual framework. Then, in the six chapters of Part II, we present the economic histories of women, treating each major racial-ethnic group separately. In Part III, we examine the commonalities and differences in women's work experiences across racial-ethnic groups over the course of U.S. economic history.

Our Method: Political, Economic, Feminist, and Historical

Our perspective is radical, feminist, and anti-racist, and we hope that this book may inspire and aid others in their work for a more just economic system. The intellectual and political origins of this book lie in the past two decades of scholarship on race and ethnicity; on workers, class, and poverty; and on women, gender, and sexuality. This scholarship had its roots in more than a decade of social activism: the drive for civil and political rights by people of color, Third World national liberation struggles, anti-war and New Left socialist movements, and feminist and lesbian/gay rights organizing. Inspired by their participation as activists in these movements, many academics, including ourselves, began to focus their research on the systems of oppression and exploitation which these movements were confronting, as well as on the history of organizing against these oppressive systems.

We were trained in mainstream or "neoclassical" economics, but have rejected this paradigm as inadequate to our purposes, and have adopted instead the theoretical framework of radical political economics. Mainstream economists view economic life as the result of rational choices made by self-interested, free individuals. They explain race and sex inequality, in our view inadequately, as the result of biological differences or of unexplained, extra-economic discriminatory preferences. In other words, for mainstream theorists, the economic system has little to do with the creation of race,

gender, or class hierarchies among people; indeed, they view economic life as essentially a struggle of “man” against nature, rather than as a power struggle among people. Radical theory, in contrast, takes into account the important ways in which economic institutions and practices structure our lives, as well as the important role which the economy plays in creating and sustaining racial-ethnic, gender, and class conflicts.¹

We also see ourselves as part of the feminist studies (or women’s or gender studies) field—a new, vital, interdisciplinary community of researchers. Feminist analysis points to the ways in which social institutions and practices both differentiate the sexes and make them, in most cases, unequal. Recent feminist research and activism have taken up the necessary and overdue project of examining racial-ethnic differences among women, beginning to break down the problematic feminist view of womanhood as a universal category and of women’s oppression as a common, shared experience.² As we will show in this volume, we do not believe that race-ethnicity, gender, or class can be correctly understood if isolated from one another, for they have been constructed and experienced simultaneously.

Since we believe that it is not nature but society which is responsible for gender, race, and class hierarchies, we look to society’s past, not to biology, for an understanding of the forces for continuity and change. Social practices and institutions are reproduced and transformed over time by individual actions; the latter are situated and constrained by those very social practices and institutions. The gender, racial-ethnic, and class hierarchies in any period are inherited from the past, and hence cannot be adequately grasped without an historical perspective. Indeed, we see historical analysis as key to the project of theorizing the relationships between race-ethnicity, gender, and class, since these never exist in an historical vacuum, but rather are always (as is all social life) rooted in a particular socio-historical context.³ In our view, ahistorical theories are not only incorrect, but also inherently conservative, for they enshrine the status quo and deny peoples’ capacities to radically transform their societies over history.

Our Epistemology: Seeking Liberatory Knowledge

Simultaneous trends in areas as disparate as literary criticism, physics, and the philosophy of science have led many in the academy to challenge the idea of an objective natural or social science. We share this perspective, according to which all social science embodies subjective points of view, and hence the preconceptions, vantage points, and concerns of social scientists.⁴ Mainstream economists view market capitalism as the best of all possible worlds, taking the standpoint of those who benefit most from this system—white, heterosexual, and upper-class men. In contrast, radical economists

take up the political cause of eliminating injustice, oppression, and exploitation; in this view, "every theory is wrong which justifies, promotes, or tolerates human oppression."⁵

As feminist philosopher Sandra Harding has argued, radical knowledge is liberatory knowledge, crafted with the goal of human liberation. This requires radical scholars to write with an awareness of their positions in the complex hierarchy of domination and subordination in which we live. Those in the position of the oppressed, people "on the margin," have a special contribution to make in the understanding of these oppressive structures: thus, the special contribution of women to feminist scholarship, of people of color to anti-racist scholarship, and of lesbians and gay men to anti-heterosexist scholarship. At the same time, Harding argues, even those with race, gender, class, and/or sexual preference privilege can become creators of liberatory knowledge if they become aware of the sources and uses of their privilege. Hence men can, through contact with feminist women or their writings, not only understand women's oppression but also understand themselves as men, shaped and privileged by gender. Similarly, whites can, through contact with anti-racist people of color or their writings, understand racial oppression as well as the meaning of whiteness, and uncover their individual roles in perpetuating racism. In this way men can do feminist work, and whites, anti-racist work.⁶

Unfortunately, most of us still lack awareness of the privileges we enjoy. Indeed, whites, men, and heterosexuals are usually not even aware of their identities as such. Whites tend to see themselves as generic humans, and to see only people of color as having a racial-ethnic identity. Similarly, men see themselves as having no gender—practicing, for example, "sports," while women, the gendered beings, practice "women's sports." Research and activism coming from such a limited awareness cannot be truly liberatory, and, however well-intentioned, may well contribute to oppression.

Harding notes that whites, men, and heterosexuals become more aware of themselves as such when in the presence of people of color, women, lesbians and gays. She suggests that it is through understanding themselves as "other" to the oppressed group that those with privilege can develop liberatory theory and practice.⁷ Writing this book has helped deepen our awareness of race, gender, and class as constitutive of all aspects of social life. Our accounts of the histories of women of different racial-ethnic groups build heavily on writings by women of the group in question, many of them part of a recent blossoming of needed research on women of color. To further highlight the omnipresence of race-ethnicity as well as gender and class, we will, whenever possible, identify the race-ethnicity of the researchers we cite (frequently, a writer's gender is evident from her or his name). Our racial-

ethnic backgrounds are as follows: Teresa is half-European American—Norwegian, German, and English—and half-Brazilian, while Julie is European American—Irish, Scotch, English, French, and German.

A Note on Sources, Language, and Scope

While research and data on women and race are improving, they are still far from adequate, especially for early U.S. history. New research on women of color, much or most of it by women of color, has made major contributions to transforming economic history from a history of white men into a multicultural history of men and women. Nevertheless, this research is still very uneven, with more depth of coverage of some racial-ethnic groups than others. Statistical sources are also incomplete; most, including the U.S. Census, provide only limited information on racial-ethnic and gender subgroups. Little, if any, comprehensive data on race are available for the period before 1900; even today, much data are not available for detailed racial-ethnic groups. Since only the decennial Censuses provide national data by detailed racial-ethnic group, our last major year of comparison is 1980. In addition, hardly any information about economic class is available. Data on wealth and land ownership are rarely collected, and that information hardly ever identifies the racial distribution of ownership. These difficulties add to the perennial problem of comparing Census statistics across time periods within which occupations and other statistics are defined differently.⁸

Throughout the book, we have had to take care not to embody sexism and racism in our language. For instance, we have avoided using masculine terms (i.e., man, men, he) to represent generic categories (all people, men and women). However, in Spanish, all words are gendered; instead of using the masculine as the generic, as is the traditional practice (*mestizos*, *Chicanos*, *Filipinos*), we have chosen to use the admittedly awkward terms *mestizas/os*, *Filipinas/os* and *Chicanas/os* when we are referring to a group which includes both men and women. To refer to women who are not European Americans, we faced a choice among the following terms: non-white women (which defines them negatively), racial-ethnic women (which, theoretically, should also include white women, who have racial and ethnic identities), and women of color (which ignores ethnicity and implies incorrectly that all non-European American women are not white). We chose women of color as the least inaccurate.

Nationality is also difficult to describe, particularly in the midst of immigration. Our convention is to describe the first generation of immigrants, those individuals born outside the United States, by their nationality of birth, whether or not they become U.S. citizens. We then describe those born in the United States, who automatically acquire U.S. citizenship, by a dual term