

The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation

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Review

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Glymph, Thavolia. *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$35.95. ISBN 978-1-4696-5363-1.

Those familiar with Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage* (2008) know how she expertly crafted her narrative and argument by compellingly revealing how the southern plantation household was a shockingly violent place, a public and political space where white plantation mistresses exerted considerable violence against enslaved women. In doing so, she brought new and much needed attention to how the Civil War and emancipation transformed gender roles in the South. Her latest book, *The Women's Fight*, continues this impressive thread and expands out to examine the war's influence and outcome on women across space, race, class, and status of freedom. This book deserves to be read by those interested not only in gender relations and roles in the nineteenth century, but also those intrigued by the ways in which the Civil War and Reconstruction touched and transformed the lives of those not that have been seemingly lost to history.

The Women's Fight is organized into three sections, each one provocative in its own right. The first section focuses on southern women—white and black, free and enslaved, wealthy and poor. Glymph emphasizes how the secession crisis and initial rush to war was embraced by many elite white women, but faced significant challenge when, because of the war itself, they were forced to flee their homes and become fellow refugees with poorer whites and enslaved people. Indeed, she articulates how this involuntary refugee status “tested the Confederacy’s ability to defend white homes and slavery.” Poor, non-slaveholding women also find themselves in this opening section. The Confederate experiment, Glymph asserts, called for southerners to “unite as white people across class lines in support of the war” and fostered patriotic sentiment that transcended traditional boundaries. (58) Perhaps most importantly, the war gave them the feeling that they had a place in the Confederacy, that they could also access and claim white womanhood. The eventual hollowness of this revealed itself to poor white women when “the demands of war

dragged their household economies into deeper impoverishment,” forcing them to ask why they should be “forced to starve” because of a war “in which they had not been consulted.” (60)

While white women—rich and poor, slaveholders and non-slaveholders—saw and experienced the war as one of limiting them, African American women saw the war as “enlarg[ing] and open[ing] to wider view existing crevices in Southern slave society” that enabled many of them to gain more information, redefine the meaning of “women in the Civil War,” and “transform the terms of the bargains they had been called to make.” (89-90) The war provided the time and space for black women to “adapt long-standing strategies of resistance” for the larger goal of emancipation. (106) While Glymph acknowledges that their ability to “make freedom more than a claim” was largely dependent on where African Americans found themselves (and the Union armies) during the war, it cannot be denied that enslaved women mobilized to not only resist slavery, but to eradicate it altogether. (106, 122)

The book’s second section focuses on northern women and exposes the tensions that existed between wealthier and middle-class white women and poor white women who often contributed to the war effort in very different ways. They also thought about it differently. Glymph highlights how most poor and working-class northern women were not nurses in hospitals, or missionaries in the South, or even necessarily fretted over slavery, “even if they worried about the war.” (135) Most of these women supported the war effort through work producing war matériel. The struggles they faced to simply feed their families in the absence of men often meant they had little to no time to volunteer, unlike wealthier women. Indeed, non-working-class white women “failed to fully grasp the economic circumstances that made it hard for poor women to contribute labor, money, or time” to supporting the war effort, as their status “could easily blind them” to the difficulties of being poor. (145)

Glymph’s chapter on the relationships between white northern women and black women during Reconstruction is one of the more intriguing aspects of her work. She highlights how these white teachers and missionaries that traveled South held onto this notion of the “white woman as a mother to the black race,” that their role was “rid[ding] black people of the vices that were carried out of slavery.” (164, 172) Despite their intentions, Glymph reveals how northern white women had difficulty establishing a “common bond with black women.” (178) Instead, black women more often felt the wrath of these women’s racism and condescension, and rarely found themselves in positions of equality with white women who claimed to be abolitionists and on their side.

Perhaps the best and most compelling aspect of Glymph's work is her ability to use a narrative structure and personal stories to drive her analysis. Readers will find an abundance of people populating this book. Their experiences highlight the thrust of each chapter as well as the overall argument of the entire work, often those whose stories have not been shared as often as they should be. The level of research that went into the book is astounding; roughly one hundred pages of notes impressively supports this well-written work and will allow readers to engage with the same sources and continue the process of recovering the voices from the past. Overall, Thavolia Glymph's *The Women's Fight* illuminates a neglected aspect of Civil War history, encouraging students and readers of the war to think about it in newer and deeper ways.

Brianna Kirk is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia. Her dissertation examines the intersections between military occupation and racial violence in immediate post-Civil War Virginia, and their implications for the broader policies of Reconstruction.