Introduction

If, as Catherine Clinton writes, Southern women have been American history’s half sisters, silenced and stereotyped Appalachian women have been only second-cousins-once-removed in the country’s regionally parochial history construction. This study breaks new ground by investigating antebellum women’s work among the multiethnic majority of females who resided in a geographically massive subregion of the U.S. Southeast that has been ignored by feminists and women historians. I will explore the complexities of the Appalachian South where slavery flourished amidst a nonslaveholding majority, a large surplus of poor white landless laborers, and a small indigenous population. On the one hand, the population of this region was diverse enough to permit extensive investigation of the racial, ethnic, and class cleavages among women. On the other hand, this region offers an unusual opportunity to explore the complex portfolio of women’s economic activities. Consisting of 215 in six Upper South states and three Lower South states (see Map 1), this large land area was characterized in the antebellum period by nonslaveholding farms and enterprises, small plantations, active small town commerce and external trade, mixed farming, light manufacturing and extractive industry. ¹

For more than thirty years, writers have been calling attention to scholarly failure to produce revisionist analyses that attack a century of accumulated stereotypes about Appalachian females. The
earliest critique which addresses the historical distortion of Appalachian women is the 1974 “Special Women’s Issue” of Mountain Life and Work, and regional female scholars are still resounding this concern in the contemporary era. The task of analyzing the work and family life of antebellum females might be simpler if Appalachian women were totally absent from history, for then we could begin with a blank slate. However, the journey toward a meaningful analysis of Appalachian women is made more difficult by the need to overcome the burden of a century of outdated assumptions about their character flaws and about their debilitating isolation in the separate sphere of their homes. Consequently, a revisionist analysis of Appalachian women must simultaneously overcome entrenched stereotypes and myths and convince other regional scholars that feminist analysis is both needed and appropriate. This revisionist research agenda is also complicated by male-dominated and male-privileging history production. Pat Beaver is concerned that “Appalachian history has been constructed out of masculinist narratives” while Sally Maggard maintains that “scholars have been working to discredit derogatory images of Appalachia,” but “gender analysis is underdeveloped in Appalachian Studies.” Barbara Ellen Smith warns that researchers who attempt to investigate mountain women “must come to terms with implicitly gendered constructions of Appalachia and narratives of regional history that feature men as the determinant actors.” According to Smith, “women have been extras, hidden behind quilts and sunbonnets in tradition-bound domestic roles that supported their husbands, sons, and fathers as they transformed the region and made its history. . . . Apart from a few, specific individuals, women’s experiences and perceptions have been peripheral in the major works of Appalachian history.” Unfortunately, the recent Encyclopedia of Appalachia continues this scholarly marginalization of women. Out of 364,000 lines of text, women, gender, and feminism are allocated only 2,031 lines— or only about 0.5 percent of the total coverage. Even though history and social science
production about Appalachian women has expanded over the last two decades, a majority of these new studies focus on the twentieth century. As Milton Ready observes, “the most outstanding feature of Appalachian women in the nineteenth century is the fact that we know so little about them.”

Moving Beyond Silencing and Privileging: Conceptual Pitfalls to Be Avoided

In order to avoid the “dialectics of silences and mentions” which Trouillot describes as significant sources of corruption to the history production process, I have sought to learn from previous scholarly advances and errors and to heed the admonitions of minority feminists about the steps that need to be taken to insure a broad-based analysis of females. As Trouillot points out, scholars must struggle against the tendency to privilege the most powerful, culturally dominant groups while silencing and demeaning women made invisible by those elites. I have designed my methodologies, set my research goals, selected and evaluated the reliability of sources in an attempt to avoid four historical pitfalls: (a) the tendency to privilege elites and their gender ideologies, (b) the tendencies to silence and to stigmatize non-elites, (c) the tendency to reduce women to a homogeneous sisterhood, and (d) the tendency to devalue women’s work solely as household maintenance outside the marketplace.

Disproportionately, U.S. women have been portrayed as affluent wives and daughters who are most centrally circumscribed by their sheltered domesticity and by their relationships to slaves or servants. With few exceptions, scholars have ignored the bottom half of the large majority of nonslaveholding families, especially those who were landless laborers. Beyond the preoccupation with elite women, U.S. women’s history has been flawed by writers’ tendencies to generalize to all females from the vantage point
of affluent women, especially the middle-classes. In living conditions, life expectancy, land ownership, and annual income, the poorer half of the U.S. and Southern Caucasian populations were so sharply polarized from the middle classes that we can know little or nothing about trends among working-class females from an investigation of women in more prosperous households. Because they have made a blunder that Trouillot describes as the production of history through the lens of a “conscious ideology” of dominant elites, U.S. women’s historians have far too often engaged in academic legitimation of the racist, sexist gender ideologies of Southern slaveholders and of affluent New Englanders by treating as factual representation of women’s lives the separate spheres notions that are bound up in the “cult of true womanhood” (also termed the “cult of domesticity”). Even though the ghosts of separate spheres conceptualizations have not yet disappeared completely from recent scholarship, this framework has received increasing criticism in recent years. Glenna Matthews points out that this ideology is grounded in the assumption that the “housewife” is a manager of servants or slaves. Consequently, the ideal model depicted a lifestyle that was not affordable for the majority of white and nonwhite women. Perhaps the most damning weakness of this ideology lies in its antebellum origins in popular social Darwinism. Long before publication of Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theses, many religious leaders and respected intellectuals had popularized very similar notions to explain poverty as an historical racial or genetic strain. The resultant elite gender conventions romanticized affluent women as the intergenerational bearers of societal ideals that they shielded from corruption in the sanctity of their homes. In sharp contrast, those elite standards accounted for the awkward presence of poor white women by claiming they were inferior “racial throwbacks” who could not hope to achieve the degree of “gentility” essential to the ideal woman. Nor could they ever be “civilized” fully because their brains never developed beyond that of white male infants, a biological deficiency that led to
“character weaknesses” that caused their poverty and ignorance. ³

Increasingly, writers are also calling into question the assumption that, by the mid-nineteenth century, the cult of true womanhood was so culturally hegemonic that all women made decisions about their work lives within its constraints. On the one hand, it is not clear that separate spheres gender conventions “designated the values and code of behavior that predominated among the middle classes.” Several writers contend that alternative womanhood ideals had greater impact on the lives of a majority of middle-class white women than the “cult of domesticity.” The gender conventions of “republican motherhood” and the “farmwife ideal” appeared in antebellum publications just about as frequently as separate spheres ideology, and these models depicted females working at income-earning endeavors outside and inside their households. The ideals of “evangelical womanhood” and of the “real womanhood” survival ethic also presented middle-class standards for females who were neither economically dependent upon husbands or isolated from participation in solving the problems of their communities. If we are to move beyond historical silencing, we must recognize that there was class and racial struggle over gender conventions. While acknowledging the diversity of middle-class standards, we must also be cognizant that slaves, Indians, poor whites, religious minorities, and free blacks developed their own gender conventions, even though they were demeaned by the nineteenth-century popular magazines which too many twentieth century scholars have privileged as evidence of widespread adherence to separate spheres ideology. ⁴

Despite recent challenges to claims about the cultural hegemony of separate spheres conventions, it is still important to test these notions against the realities that faced nineteenth century Appalachian women. On the one hand, the non-elite females of this region were very similar in life circumstances to their peers throughout the country. On the other hand, Appalachian women-- perhaps to a greater extent than
the females of any other U.S. region-- have been repeatedly stigmatized by some of the worst social Darwinist elements of separate spheres thinking. While Southern women are held up against the stereotype of the slaveholding mistress, Appalachian women carry the weight of a century of rediscoveries of their “peculiar people” by external commentators. In each of those ruthless forays from the 1890s through the 1980s, yellow journalists and policymakers have reduced their lives to that of illiterate mountain matriarchs who are menial victims of toil and sexual promiscuity, who are crippled by their backward culture, and who cannot overcome their poverty because they carry the debilitated genes of racial throwbacks who settled the region’s frontiers. Even though they offer no empirical evidence to support the stereotype that “women’s roles were more clearly confined to the home,” respected Appalachian scholars have reiterated and legitimated that mythology since 1980. While I could draw upon hundreds of examples from the last two decades, I will pinpoint instead a recent regional publication which will be housed on library shelves all over the country. In the 2006 *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, regional scholars reduce women to a racially and economically homogeneous group who operate only in a home sphere. According to the entry on gender roles:

Appalachian families generally follow traditional gender roles. Typically they consist of a provider father, a caregiving mother, and the couple’s dependent children. Following this model, Appalachian households have been historically patriarchal with men serving as heads of households– owning land, directing production, controlling income use, and making decisions– while women act as loving nurturers to their husbands and children.

Repeating the rhetoric that was typical of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, the entry further claims that farm labor “was divided spatially. Mothers and daughters were primarily responsible for work done
in the house and yard area; fathers and sons were responsible for crops and other chores beyond the house.” Ignoring the realities of the lives of Cherokee, enslaved, free black and poor white females, the Encyclopedia goes on to mislead readers that all women “were effectively excluded from independent labor in agriculture.”

In addition to the silencing and misrepresentation of poor white women, Pat Beaver observes that “mythologized conventions of a static and homogeneous (white) society have dominated the literature on the southern Appalachian region.” In fact, Indians and African-Americans are absent from the vast majority of the pages that have been written about Appalachia, transforming them into peoples without regional history. To obliterate nonwhites from regional history is perhaps the ultimate act of academic and journalistic racism, but there is a second pervasive regional myth which compounds the ideological denial of the presence of nonwhite Appalachians. Well before the Civil War, Lanman acknowledged the presence of slavery in Southern Appalachia, but he described those slaves as “the happiest and most independent portion of the population.” Such ideology pervaded the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century journalists, novelists, and clerics and still predominates popular regional mythology today. From within the region, early twentieth century writers extolled the Anglo-Saxon heritage of Southern Appalachians who had not only kept out “foreign” elements but had “still more effectively. . . excluded the negroes.” Purportedly, “Appalachian America ha[d] received no foreign immigration” after the Revolutionary War. Consequently, “nowhere will be found purer Anglo-Saxon blood.” Carter Woodson, African-American founder of the Journal of Negro History, embraced the regional mythology, declaring Appalachians to be “more prejudiced against the slave holder than against the Negro.” As John Inscoe has observed recently, “the concept of Appalachia as a solid bastion of freedom and equality has been difficult to shake.” That white
Appalachians have themselves been “otherized” and “marginalized” by outsiders should not be looked upon as evidence that they must, therefore, have been less racist or less prejudiced than other Southerners. Historical silencing also results from the narrow white/black slave dichotomy which predominates in Southern women’s history. This inaccurate image of a bi-polar society ignores indigenous peoples, as well as non-British immigrants and females of persecuted religious minorities.  

A third form of historical silencing occurs when analysts reduce all women to a shared patriarchal position in subordination to white male elites. Minrose Gwin disagrees that there is any “common ground between women of both races and a peculiarly female strength to be generated from such bonds,” and Dolores Janiewski dismisses any possibility of an interracial sisterhood “under the skin” that was grounded in shared biological aspects of reproduction and housework. Anne McClintock reminds us that “the rational privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided– if borrowed– power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men. As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting.” Because they were so deeply differentiated by race, class, ethnicity, religion, and rural/urban divides, such a narrow approach cannot elucidate the lived experiences of the majority. Poor white, nonwhite, and religious dissident females certainly did not share the same degree of access to political power, economic resources, and dominant culture as either elite slaveholding or middle-class white women. Nor did shared gender transform the lives of rural and urban females of different racial, ethnic and class groupings into mirror images of one another. While they existed in the same slaveholding patriarchal system, antebellum Southern women benefitted from that system and were exploited and damaged by that system to vastly different degrees.
It is in the analysis of women’s work that U.S. women’s history is probably weakest. Delfino and Gillespie alert us to this void in the accumulated scholarship. “We know too little,” they remind us, “about the work lives of ordinary women in the Old South. We know even less about their working lives. Although the past two decades have witnessed an explosion of scholarship on southern women in the nineteenth century, much of this work has focused on the world of the plantation.” However, the absence of scholarly attention is not the only problem. Conceptually, we need to stop being blinded by over-simplified stereotypes about women being trapped in housebound labors outside the reach of patriarchal market forces, an idea that is a ghost from the separate spheres legacy. If we search only for unpaid and income-earning labors that were “manifestations of their private roles as housewives and mothers,” we miss the real “dialectics of waged and unwaged labor” that characterize most women’s resource accumulation. Zillah Eisenstein admonishes us to employ a “multigridded conceptualization” of women’s work, taking into account differences of race, class, ethnicity, marital status, and religion. We must also stop assigning a degree of “rural isolation of women” that neither reflects the capacity of women to market commodities in towns nor gives voice to those females who resided in or near towns. We must also move toward investigations of women’s labors which recognize real gradations in the degree to which women worked hard and publicly at manual labor.

Finally, we must move away from the naive notion that all work done by women in households was without economic value and was outside the market. On the one hand, we need to investigate how women’s work is “embedded, indeed hidden, within a gendered division of labor that allocated different tasks and status to women and men, as Barbara Ellen Smith observes. It is not enough, however, to search out “women’s work” as a distinct category from “men’s work.” That can only lead us toward silencing and
homogenization of much of women’s work that is disguised behind class and racial junctures among women themselves. An effective analysis of women’s work, then, must simultaneously examine “women’s and men’s differential access to and control over material resources” and the structural inequalities that exist among women themselves. On the other hand, we must take special care when analyzing the work done inside women’s households, for some of that work is almost always aimed at the marketplace, even when it is an extension of the wife’s unpaid household labor. In fact, women’s household labor subsidizes capitalist commodity chains; it does not exist outside capitalism in some isolated “household economy.”

To varying degrees depending on their class and racial positions, antebellum U.S. women engaged in a complex portfolio of agricultural and nonagricultural labors that included three types of unpaid labor and three types of paid labors:

- unpaid labors to sustain the household, clan or family,
- unpaid labors associated with biological reproduction and child rearing,
- waged labor outside the household,
- business operation inside or outside the household,
- income-earning labors within the informal sector, and
- unpaid charitable or community work.

This diverse labor portfolio calls attention to three historical “facts” that are too often silenced. First, we cannot so cleanly separate women’s household labors from work that is aimed at the external economic arena, for much income-earning activity occurs in the home, and women contribute significant “hidden labor” to male-dominated economic activities. Second, almost all rural women engaged in some nonagricultural labors from which they earned income. In order to capture much of the economically-
valuable work of women, we must pay attention to the conceptual importance of the informal sector, those economic activities that result in the sale of commodities or services but which are neither waged nor officially documented. Like women in poor countries today, far more antebellum Appalachian women earned income from informal sector exchanges than from wages or from business entrepreneurship.

**Goals, Research Questions and Methods**

To paraphrase Anne Firor Scott, my first goal is to make invisible Appalachian women visible, in all their class, racial, ethnic, and religious complexities. I concur with Trouillot that we need to pay far more attention to marginalized peoples who have been silenced and erased from official history production. I am convinced that the way to accomplish that kind of more inclusive history is through the pursuit of dialogic truth, which according to Immanuel Wallerstein “assumes and thrives on the notion of a community of many voices and multiple perspectives.” The path to dialogic truth “is through very intensive, often very emotional dialogue tempered by careful sifting of the evidence, in order to arrive at a multi-voice, multiple perspective version of the truth.” Consequently, I have heeded the advice of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall that “we need a historical practice. . . that releases multiple voices.” Furthermore, I have taken to heart the counsel of Hall that a truly “inclusive history of women” must be simultaneously multicultural, rather than isolating groups of women from one another. I certainly concur with Mary Anglin that “there was no essential ‘Appalachian woman’ but rather a profusion of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, gendered, and legal statuses and/or circumstances.” Consequently, I explore all the diverse racial, ethnic and class groupings of Appalachian women, and I present them side-by-side within chapters so that immediate comparisons are possible.
Following the admonitions of minority feminists to avoid the pitfall of the notion of a “Southern sisterhood,” I have paid careful attention to the structural mechanisms through which affluent white women have benefitted from the oppression of nonwhite minorities and have exploited poor white females and males. In order to avoid reducing women to a homogenous gendered category, I have undertaken race/class/gender analysis in reaction to the earlier recommendations of feminists. 

My second goal is to document the diversity and complexity of women’s labors—inside and outside their households. In the process of teasing out the diversity of women’s paid and unpaid labors, I will call into question the separate spheres thesis that “both unmarried and married women did their primary work in households, in families.” Indeed, four historical realities of the everyday lives of a majority of Appalachian women stand as stark contradictions of “separate spheres” ideologies:

- the economic contributions of women’s home-based labors to the economy,
- participation of women in waged jobs, business or farm management, and cash-earning outside their homes,
- the unpaid labors of women in community organizations, churches and charities, and
- the high percentage of all women who lived outside marriages.

Women’s work was vital to both family and economy, and “the connections women forged between the household and economies were hydralike, shooting out in multiple directions.” As I will show in subsequent chapters, it is historically misleading to dichotomize women’s lives between a household sphere and the rest of the world, for the household is just as much a capitalist unit of production and reproduction as is the farm, the industry, and the marketplace.

My third goal is to move beyond the conceptualization of woman as victim and to capture the ways
in which women resisted oppression and domination. Gerda Lerner warns that women are not just acted upon by male-dominated history, but they also make history by resisting inequality and oppression. “While inferior status and oppressive restraints were no doubt aspects of women’s historical experience. . . the limitation of this approach is that it makes it appear either that women were largely passive or that, at the most, they reacted to male pressures or to the restraints of patriarchal society.” Barbara Ellen Smith emphasizes that “it is a measure of lower-class women’s ‘subaltern’ status that their gender subversions, negotiations, and rebellions have often been covert, indirect, and unrecorded– at least by academics. . . . Those who, in the official documents of history, emerge at most as longsuffering victims, nonetheless practice their own willful humanity.” According to James Scott, each subordinate group “creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.” Thus, I have searched out as many Appalachian women’s hidden transcripts of everyday and organized resistance that I could find, and I have incorporated those actions throughout the book rather than isolate them in a unidimensional chapter without historical context. 12

In order to accomplish these goals, I focused on five research questions.

! Are nineteenth-century separate spheres ideologies accurate descriptors of women’s work lives?

! Were these gender conventions culturally hegemonic, or was there class, racial and ethnic struggle over the scope of women’s work and family roles?

! What were racial, ethnic, and class junctures among women?

! What was the scope of women’s agricultural and nonagricultural work, and how did this work vary across different racial, ethnic, and class groupings?

! When women’s work conflicted with the elite gender conventions that were embedded in public
statutes, what were the impacts on poor and nonwhite families, mothers, and children?

Which groups of women were denied the ideals of motherhood and family that were advocated in the cult of true womanhood, and how was their work connected to those family disruptions?

To investigate these questions, I triangulated hundreds of archival and primary sources, oral histories, and women’s narratives with statistical analysis of published census data and of four samples of nearly 20,000 antebellum households drawn from public records. In order to reserve as much space as possible for substantive analysis, I have posted at a permanent electronic archive an extensive discussion about quantitative methods and about the primary sources that I have used to end historical silences about women. Even though it did not achieve statehood until 1863, the reader will find discussions of West Virginia throughout the book, and those references are not an historical error on my part. Because that area had the lowest incidence of enslavement and one of the highest rates of white impoverishment in the country, it is crucial to set it apart from the rest of Virginia. To insure that my analysis would adequately represent conditions in this zone, I have separated out quantitative data and primary sources for those counties that became West Virginia during the Civil War.

**Organization of the Book**

*Southern Laboring Women* is situated dialectically where the intellectual discourses of feminism, Southern women’s history, the sociology of race and ethnicity, class analysis, U.S. economic history, and world-systems analysis converge and diverge. //here

In Chapters 1 and 3, I call into question the notion of a shared sisterhood among women by
exploring the racism of white Appalachians toward Cherokee and black Appalachians. I also examine the resistance of those marginalized females against oppression. In Chapter 2, I explore the ethnic and religious differences which prevented Appalachian women from sharing a gendered sisterhood. In Chapter 4, I address the degree to which class differences divided women of the same racial groups, examine class differences in gender conventions, and investigate class struggle by Cherokee females.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I explore the agricultural and nonagricultural labors of women, pointing to the elastic demarcation between home and workplace. In the 18th and 19th centuries, more than half of all U.S. women resided in poor households, and there was an even higher incidence of poverty in many Appalachian counties. For that reason, I focus on that majority of women who worked outside their household domains, often employed at manual labor or public occupations that the “cult of true womanhood” labeled "men’s work.” It was not just a woman’s race that determined the nature of her work, for the class position of white women determined whether they would engage in manual labor or work alongside males in public income-earning activities. Primary sources make it very clear that poor white women frequently stepped over ethnic/racial lines and gender lines, as they tried desperately to provide survival resources to their households.

In Chapters 7 and 8, I examine the structural contradictions between a woman’s reproductive labors and her income-producing work. By undertaking a diverse array of family constructs and of agricultural and nonagricultural labors, women resisted the separate spheres ideologies which Southern elites embedded in public statutes and court systems. In combination with her marginalized class or race position, a woman’s publicly-visible work attracted public regulation of her gender roles as mother and wife and delimited the degree of legal protection that she was provided against sexual exploitation and against
disruption of her motherhood roles.

To publish all the information about contextual background, sources, methods, and quantitative evidence would require far more space than is afforded to me here. In order to make those materials available to other researchers as quickly as possible, I have created a permanent electronic library archive. In order to shorten the original manuscript for publication, I have also stored several substantive discussions there that I did not have space to include here, including extensive discussions of women’s work on Appalachian frontiers, pressures toward assimilation of diverse European ethnic groups, and stereotyping of Appalachian women in journalistic and scholarly accounts between the 1890s and 1980. The website also offers an extensive bibliographic essay about primary sources used to investigate Cherokee, African-American, and poor white females. Throughout the Notes, you will see references to sources which can be accessed at this website:

http://filebox.vt.edu/users/wdunaway/women
Introduction Notes


5. For more extensive discussion, see “Legacy of Social Darwinism in Appalachian Scholarship” and “Stereotypes of Appalachian Women” at the website. Since 1980, most regional writers have either not mentioned women at all, or they briefly isolated women in their homes. For regional writers who accepted assumptions about separate spheres in their 1980s and 1990s work, see Eller, Miners, Millhands, p. 31, Waller, Feud, p. 58, Blackmun, Western North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 169. In 1978, Lewis, Kobak, and Johnson, “Family,” p. 115, offered a short, low-key contradiction of separate spheres notions, but the only 1970s feminist challenge to this ideology was Kahn, Hillbilly Women. Abrams and Haskell, Encyclopedia of Appalachia, pp. 170, 172. Two other 21st century works by regional scholars which will be heavily used as textbooks promulgate the same mythology. In his recent regional history, Drake, History, pp. 187-88, applies without evidence or criticism the separate spheres notion. Similarly, Williams, History, pp. 120-23, offers no description of women’s work beyond home and farmyard.


8. Delfino and Gillespie, Neither Lady Nor Slave, p. 1. Gimenez, “Dialectics,” pp. 25-46. Eisenstein, “Constructing a Theory,” pp. 139-40. Anglin, “Towards a Workable Past,” p. 82. Supervision of laborers and completion of tasks are not the same thing, so writers need to be very clear about the nature of the work done by affluent women, and they need to specify that manual labor was not done by these women who relied on slaves and servants.


11. Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, p. 26. Ryan, Cradle, p. 203. From a feminist standpoint, we need to be careful about broad use of the phrase “labor force” which refers narrowly to waged occupations because, historically and worldwide today, women earn most of their income and generate household resources outside waged occupations.