

## Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression

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**ABSTRACT:** A colonial labor system and other forms of racial oppression shaped the productive and reproductive labor of racial ethnic women in ways that made their experiences fundamentally different from those underlying the construction of feminist analyses of women's oppression. For black, Mexican-American and Chinese-American women, key concepts such as the private-public dichotomy, gender conflict within the family and the division of reproductive labor need to be reformulated. This study examines the historical evidence on black, Mexican-American and Chinese-American women's work from the mid-nineteenth century to the present in light of contemporary Marxist-feminist and colonial labor system theories. Thus, the author begins to reformulate and synthesize key concepts in these contemporary theories to explain the experiences of racial ethnic women.

### INTRODUCTION

The failure of the feminist movement to address the concerns of black, Hispanic and Asian-American women is currently engendering widespread discussion in white women's organizations. Paralleling this discussion is a growing interest among racial ethnic women<sup>1</sup> in articulating aspects of their experiences that have been ignored in feminist analyses of women's oppression (e.g., oral histories by Sterling 1979; Elessar, MacKenzie and Tixier y Vigil 1980; Kim 1983; and social and historical studies by Dill 1979; Mirande and Enriquez 1979; Davis 1981; Hooks 1981; Jones 1984).<sup>2</sup>

As an initial corrective, racial ethnic scholars have begun research on racial ethnic women in relation to employment, the family and the ethnic community, both historically and contemporarily (e.g., Acosta-Belen 1979; Mora and Del Castillo 1980; Melville 1980; Rodgers-Rose 1980; Tsuchida 1982). The most interesting of these studies describe the social world and day-to-day struggles of racial ethnic women, making visible what has up to now been invisible in the social sciences and humanities. These concrete data constitute the first step toward understanding the effects of race and gender oppression in the lives of racial ethnic women.

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A necessary next step is the development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks for analyzing the interaction of race and gender stratification. Separate models exist for analyzing race, ethnic or gender stratification. Although the "double" (race, gender) and "triple" (race, gender, class) oppression of racial ethnic women are widely acknowledged, no satisfactory theory has been developed to analyze what happens when these systems of oppression intersect. A starting point for developing such a theory would appear to lie in those models which view race and gender stratification as part of a larger system of institutionalized inequality. During the 1970s two models which view race and gender divisions as embedded in and helping to maintain an overall system of class exploitation came to the fore: the *patriarchy* model developed by Marxist-feminists to explain the subordination of women (e.g., Weinbaum and Bridges 1979; Sokoloff 1980; Brown 1981; and Hartmann 1981a) and the *internal colonialism* model developed by activists and scholars to explain the historic subordination of blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and other people of color in the United States (e.g., Clark 1965; Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Moore 1970; Barrera, Muñoz and Ornelas 1972; and Blauner 1972).

At the center of the Marxist-feminist analysis is the concept of patriarchy, which may be defined as a hierarchical system of power which enables men as a class to have authority and power over women (Hartmann 1976; Sokoloff 1980). In this model the main mechanism by which control is achieved and maintained by men is the *sexual division of labor*, which places men in positions of authority over women and permits them to reap disproportionate benefits. Similarly, at the center of the internal colonialism model is a system of power relations by which subordinate minorities are kept politically and economically weak so they can be more easily exploited as workers. The main mechanism by which economic dependency is maintained is a *colonial labor system*, characterized by a segmented labor market, discriminatory barriers and separate wage scales. This system ensures that people of color are relegated to the worst jobs, i.e. insecure, low-paying, dangerous, dirty and dead-end.

Neither model explicitly recognizes the specific situation of racial ethnic women. The patriarchy model ignores differences among women based on race. When race is discussed, it is treated as a parallel system of stratification: an analogy is often made between "women" and "minorities," an analogy that involves comparison of the subordinate status of white women and minority men. Minority women are left in limbo. Similarly, the internal colonialism model ignores gender by treating members of colonized minorities as undifferentiated with respect to gender. Analyses of racial ethnic labor have generally focused only on male workers. Yet, these studies also assume that the detrimental impacts of the labor system on men is synonymous with the impacts on the group as a whole, men and women alike.

Despite the focus on only one axis of stratification, the patriarchy and internal colonialism models have some important commonalities. Each focuses on explaining the persistence of inequality and sees gender/race stratification as dynamically related to the organization of the economy. Thus, each implies an historical perspective, one that traces changes in the relations between dominant and subordinate groups in relation to the development of capitalism. Each

emphasizes institutional arrangements that ensure control by the dominant group over the labor of the subordinate group. There thus seems to be some common ground for developing a more integrated framework by combining insights from the two perspectives.

This paper is a preliminary effort to identify aspects of the two models that might contribute to an integrated framework. I will start by briefly reviewing the Marxist-feminist analysis of women's subordination. I will then review racial ethnic women's experience as members of colonized minorities in the United States. In light of this experience, I will examine the paid and unpaid work of Chinese, Mexican-American and black women from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, showing how they diverge from those presumed to be typical of white women. In the concluding section, suggestions are made for revision of Marxist-feminist theory to be more inclusive of the race-gender interaction.

### MARXIST-FEMINIST ANALYSIS

The Marxist-feminist perspective views women's subordination as a product of two interacting systems: patriarchy and capitalism. While generally adhering to the Marxist analysis of class exploitation, Marxist-feminists diverge by giving equal importance to patriarchy, which, they argue, existed prior to capitalism, though interacting with it as capitalism developed. According to this analysis, the main mechanism by which patriarchy was established and is maintained today is the sexual division of labor. The assignment of certain tasks (usually the more onerous and/or less valued) to women, and others (usually the more highly valued) to men, is considered more or less universal.

Under capitalism the sexual division of labor takes a particular form due to the separation of production of goods, and then services, from the household. As production was industrialized the household became increasingly privatized, and its functions reduced to consumption, which includes shopping and negotiating for services (Weinbaum and Bridges 1979) and biological and social reproduction, including child care, cleaning, preparing food and providing emotional support for the breadwinner. As capital took over production, thus households became increasingly dependent on the market for goods and, therefore, on wages to purchase goods and services needed for survival. During the nineteenth century — in part because men could be more intensively exploited as wage laborers, while women could benefit capital as full-time consumers and reproducers — a specialization developed, whereby women were assigned almost exclusive responsibility for household consumption and reproduction and men were allocated responsibility for publicly organized production. This division became prescribed in the mid-nineteenth century with the development of the cult of domesticity, which idealized the woman as the center of home and hearth (Welter 1966). This division of labor contributed to the subordination of women by making them economically dependent on a male wage earner. Simultaneously the domestic code controlled women's behavior by threatening those who deviated from it with the loss of their feminine identity.

The ideal of separate spheres was, of course, unattainable for many women whose fathers or husbands were unable to earn a family wage and who therefore had to engage in income producing activities to support themselves and their families (Lerner 1969; Easton 1976). Yet the conception of women as consumers and reproducers affected them too, depressing their position in the labor market. Women were defined as secondary workers, a status maintained by a sexual division in the labor market, i.e. occupational segregation. Jobs allocated to women were typically at the bottom of the authority hierarchy, low in wages, dead-end and frequently insecure. The secondary position of women in the labor force meant that women had little leverage to shift the burden of household work onto husbands, so they continued to be responsible for the domestic sphere. Moreover, because of low wages and insecure jobs, even when employed, women remained dependent on the additional wages of the male earner (Hartmann 1976; Kessler-Harris 1982).

This analysis has much to offer: it permits us to view women's subordination as part of a larger framework of economic exploitation. It also draws connections between women's domestic work and their work in the labor force, and shows how subordination in one sphere reinforces subordination in the other. It is intended as a general analysis that encompasses all women. Yet, it is built on class- and race-bounded experiences. To what extent do the concepts developed in the Marxist-feminist model apply to the experience of racial ethnic women? To what extent does the private-public split and women's association with the domestic sphere exist for racial ethnic women? To what extent has economic dependence on men been an important basis for racial ethnic women's subordination? To what extent do struggles over allocation of household labor create gender conflict in racial ethnic households?

In order to begin addressing these questions we need to examine the impacts of race stratification on racial ethnic women's work, both paid and unpaid. For this, I draw on both earlier and more recent research on the labor histories of "colonized minorities." Because histories of the various peoples in different regions of the country vary and because of the limited size and scope of this paper, I will limit my examination to three case studies for which there is comparable information from the mid-nineteenth century to the present: Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, Chinese in California and blacks in the South.

### COLONIZED MINORITIES IN INDUSTRIALIZING AMERICA

The United States started out as a colonial economy which offered raw resources and land to European and American capitalists. In order to develop the economic infrastructure and extract resources, capitalists needed labor, which was always in short supply. The presence of racial ethnic groups in this country is tied to this demand for labor. Most were brought to this country for the express purpose of providing cheap and malleable labor (Cheng and Bonacich 1984).

Although European immigrants were also welcomed as a source of low-wage labor, they were incorporated into the urban economies of the north. Racial

ethnics were recruited primarily to fill labor needs in economically backward regions: the West, Southwest and South (Blauner 1972). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Chinese men constituted from a quarter to a third of the work force (reclaiming agricultural lands, building railroads, and working in mines), and 90 percent of the domestic and laundry workers in California (Saxton 1971). During this same period, native Chicanos and Mexican immigrants (Mexicanos) were employed as miners, railroad hands and agricultural laborers in the western states (Barrera 1979). In the years following emancipation blacks were concentrated in agriculture, as well as in heavy labor in construction and domestic service in the South (Cheng and Bonacich 1984). All three groups helped build the agricultural and industrial base on which subsequent industrial development rested, but were excluded from the industrial jobs that resulted.

Racial ethnic labor was cheaper for infrastructure building in two senses: racial ethnics were paid less (including lower benefits) and provided a reserve army to be drawn in when the economy expanded or labor was needed for a short-term project, and pushed out when the economy contracted or the particular project ended. Their cheapness was ensured by institutional barriers that undercut their ability to compete in the labor market. The labor market itself was stratified into separate tiers for whites and racial ethnics. The better paying, more skilled, cleaner and secure jobs in highly capitalized industries were reserved for white workers, leaving the low paying, insecure, dangerous, seasonal and dead-end jobs in competitive industries for people of color. A dual wage system was also characteristic of the colonial labor system; wages for racial ethnics were always lower than for whites in comparable jobs (Barrera 1979). White workers benefitted because better jobs were reserved for them. The dual labor system also buffered them from the effects of periodic depressions, since racial ethnics took the brunt of layoffs and unemployment.

Further, racial ethnics were prevented from competing for better work and improved conditions by legal and administrative restrictions. Restrictions on their rights and freedoms began right at the time of entry or incorporation into the United States. While the exact form of entry for the three groups differed, in all cases an element of subordination was involved. The most striking instance of forced entry was that of blacks, who were captured, torn from their homelands, transported against their will and sold into slavery. This institution so structured their lives that even after emancipation former slaves were held in debt bondage by the southern sharecropping system (Painter 1976). Equally involuntary was the incorporation of Mexicans residing in territories taken over by United States military conquest. Anglo settlers invaded what is now California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. When the United States seized the land, native Mexicans living in those areas were reduced to agricultural peons or wage laborers (Barrera 1979). An intermediate case between forced and free entry was that of the Chinese. Their immigration was the result of the economic and political chaos engendered, at least in part, by western colonial intrusion into China (Lyman 1974). Many Chinese men entered the United States as contract laborers so they could support destitute kin in their villages. Under the credit ticket system they signed away seven years of labor in exchange for their passage (Ling 1912).

These unfree conditions of entry imposed special liabilities on racial ethnics. Blacks were not citizens and counted in the census as only three-fifths of a person, Mexicans were defined as second-class citizens, and Chinese were aliens, ineligible for citizenship. All three groups were placed in separate legal categories, denied basic rights and protections and barred from political participation. Thus, they could be coerced, intimidated and restricted to the least desirable jobs, where they were especially vulnerable to exploitation.

The process of incorporation and entry into the labor system in turn had profound effects on the culture and family systems of racial ethnics. Native languages, religion and other ways of life were constrained, destroyed or transformed and kin ties and family authority undermined. As Blauner (1972:66) notes:

The labor system through which people of color became Americans tended to destroy or weaken their cultures and communal ties. Regrouping and new institutional forms developed, but in situations with extremely limited possibilities.

We are most familiar with assaults on family ties of blacks under slavery due to sale of individuals regardless of kin ties, slave master control over marriage and reproduction, and the brutal conditions of life. Scholars and policy analysts in the past argued that slavery permanently weakened kin ties and undermined the conjugal household, thereby creating a legacy of family pathology (Frazier 1939; Moynihan 1965). More recently, revisionist historians have argued that slaves resisted assaults on family integrity and managed to maintain conjugal and kin ties to a greater extent than previously believed (Blassingame 1972; Fogel and Engerman 1974; and Gutman 1976). Gutman (1975) found that a large proportion of slave marriages were of long standing and many couples legalized their marriages when given the opportunity to do so after emancipation. Black families showed great strength in the face of assaults on kin networks, though their survival required great struggle and exacted great costs.

Less well known are the assaults on the culture and family lives of Chicanos and Chinese-Americans. In both groups households were broken apart by the demand for male labor. Many Mexican-American men were employed in mining camps and on railroad gangs which required them to live apart from wives and children (Barrera 1979). This was also true for male migrant agricultural workers until the 1880s when the family labor system became the preferred mode (Camarillo 1979). In the case of the Chinese, only prime age males were recruited as workers, and wives and children had to be left behind (Coolidge 1909). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 not only prohibited further entry of Chinese laborers, it also barred resident laborers from bringing in wives and children (Wu 1972; Lyman 1974). This policy was aimed at preventing the Chinese from settling permanently, once their labor was no longer needed.

Given these conditions, what was the work of racial ethnic women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

#### RACIAL ETHNIC WOMEN'S WORK IN INDUSTRIALIZING AMERICA

The specific conditions of life experienced by the three groups of women differed. However, the women shared some common circumstances due to

their similar positions in the colonial labor system and the similar difficulties the system created for their families. All three groups of women had to engage in constant struggle for both immediate survival and the long term continuation of the family and community. Because men of their groups were generally unable to earn a family wage, women had to engage in subsistence and income producing activities both in and out of the household. In addition they had to work hard to keep their families together in the face of outside forces that threatened their integrity.

#### *Chinese-American Women*

Perhaps the least is known about Chinese-American women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This may be due to the fact that very few working class Chinese women actually resided in the United States then. For most of the period from 1860 to 1920 the ratio of men to women ranged from 13 to 20 males for every female. As late as 1930 there were only 9,742 females aged 10 or over in a population that included 53,650 males of the same age (Glenn 1983). It is estimated that over half of the men had left wives behind in China (Coolidge 1909). Although most of these wives never came to the United States, their lives must be considered as part of the experience of American racial ethnics, for they raised subsequent generations of sojourners who went to America, often with false papers. Little research has been done on what women did in their home villages or how they survived. The available evidence, based partly on some family history interviews I conducted and partly on other sources (Kingston 1977; Hirata 1979), suggests the following: the wife often resided with the husbands' parents or other kin, who received remittances from the husband, acted on his behalf and oversaw the household. Wives took care of children, performed household work under the direction of the mother-in-law, and helped in subsistence farming. Her sexual chastity was carefully guarded, as was her overall behavior. She might never see her husband again or, if lucky, see him once or twice over the course of 20 or 30 years during his rare visits home.

In the late nineteenth century, aside from wives of merchants who were still allowed entry into the United States, the only notable group of Chinese women were prostitutes (Hirata 1979; Goldman 1981). The imbalanced sex ratio created a demand for sexual services. Except for a few years when some women were able to immigrate on their own as free entrepreneurs, Chinese prostitutes were either indentured servants or outright slaves controlled by Chinese tongs or business associations. They had been sold by their parents or kidnapped and involuntarily transported. The controllers of the trade reaped huge profits from buying and selling women and hiring out their services. Women who ran away were hunted down and returned to their captors, usually with the collusion of the police and courts. Unable to speak English and without allies, the women could not defend themselves.

Initially the Chinese were dispersed throughout the West in mining towns, railroad camps and agricultural fields. They were subjected to special penalties, such as a foreign miner's tax in California that rendered it difficult for them to make a living. Finally, during the economic depression of the 1870s the Chinese were forcibly driven out of many areas (Nee and Nee 1972). They congregated in urban Chinatowns, so that by the 1880s the Chinese were a

largely urban population. In place of households, the men formed clan and regional associations for mutual welfare and protection (Lyman 1977). By the early 1900s some Chinese men were able, with minimal capital, to establish laundries, restaurants and stores, thereby qualifying as merchants eligible to bring over wives (Lyman 1968). These small businesses were a form of self-exploitation; they were profitable only because all members of the family contributed their labor and worked long hours. Living quarters were often in back of the shop or adjacent to it, so that work and family life were completely integrated. Work in the family enterprise went on simultaneously with household maintenance and child care. First up and last to bed, women had even less leisure than the rest of the family. Long work hours in crowded and rundown conditions took its toll on the whole family. Chinatowns had abnormally high rates of tuberculosis and other diseases (Lee, Lim and Wong 1969).

It is unclear what proportion of women laboring in family laundries and shops were counted as gainfully employed in the census. They were undoubtedly severely undercounted. In any case some sizable proportion of women were employed as independent wage workers. As employees, Chinese women were concentrated in ethnic enterprises because of color bars in white-owned businesses. Nearly half of all gainfully employed women in 1930 worked in jobs that were typical of Chinese enterprise. Out of a work force of 1559, garment operatives and seamstresses accounted for 11.7 percent, sales and trade for 10.6 percent, laundry operatives for 7.3 percent, waitresses for 8.2 percent, and clerical workers for 11.2 percent. The only major form of employment outside the ethnic community was private household service, which accounted for 11.7 percent of Chinese women (U.S. Census 1933; for broad occupational distributions, see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Occupational Distribution of Employed Black, Chinese-American, Mexican-American and White Women, 10 Years of Age and Over, 1930**

Occupation	Black	Chinese	Mexican	White
Professional	3.4	11.3	3.0	16.5
Trade	0.8	15.3	9.0	10.7
Public Service	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.2
Clerical	0.6	11.2	2.6	22.4
Manufacturing	5.5	20.4	19.3	20.0
Transportation	0.1	1.1	0.5	3.1
Agriculture	26.9	1.5	21.2	4.5
Service, (excluding				
Servants and Laundresses)	35.4	27.6	13.5	20.1
Servants/Laundresses	27.2	11.7	30.8	2.5
Total	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteen Census of the United States: 1930. Population, Volume 5. General Report on Occupations, Chapter 3, Color and Nativity of Gainful Workers.* (Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), Tables 2, 4, and 6.

### *Mexican-American Women*

The information on the work of Chicanas in the late nineteenth century is also sparse. Barrera (1979) suggests that prior to the 1870s Chicano families followed the traditional division of labor, with women responsible for household work and child care. Thus, Mexican-American women worked largely in the home. Under the conditions of life among working class and agricultural families this work was extensive and arduous (Jensen 1981). In rural areas the household work included tending gardens and caring for domestic animals. Many Chicano men were employed in extracting industries which required them to live in work camps and company towns in unsettled territories. If a wife remained behind with the children in the home village, she had to engage in subsistence farming and raise children on her own. If she joined her husband in camp, she had to carry on domestic chores and child rearing under frontier conditions, forced to buy necessities in company stores that quickly used up meager wages. Even in the city the barrios often had no running water, and unsanitary conditions added to women's burdens of nursing the sick (Garcia 1980).

By the 1880s Mexican-American women were increasingly being brought into the labor force. In cities such as Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and El Paso, Chicanas were employed as servants, cooks and laundresses (Camarillo 1979; Garcia 1980). An economic depression in the 1880s forced more women to seek outside wage work, not only in private households, but also as washerwomen in commercial laundries, and as cooks, dishwashers, maids and waitresses in hotels and other public establishments. In this same period women entered the agricultural labor market. Prior to that time prime-age male workers were preferred for seasonal and migratory field work. In the 1880s whole families began to be used, a pattern that accelerated during World War I (Camarillo 1979:91). By the 1920s family labor was common throughout the Southwest. Describing the situation in Colorado, Taylor (1929) noted that landowners felt that families, despite their lower productivity per unit, were preferable because they were a more stable work force that could be counted on to return year after year.

These trends are reflected in occupational patterns of Chicana women. Between 1880 and 1930, they tended to be employed in two main types of situations. A large part of the Chicana work force, 20 percent officially, were employed as farm laborers (Barrera 1979). Many of these were employed as part of the piece rate system in which entire families worked and moved with the crops (Taylor 1937; Fisher 1953; McWilliams 1971). Under this system women had to bear and raise children, cook and keep house, while also working long hours in the field or packing house. Infants accompanied their parents to the fields, and children started working from an early age. Living conditions in migrant camps were extremely harsh. Adults rarely lived past 55 and infant and child mortality was high. Children had no regular schooling because of constant movement and the need for their labor. Schools were geared to fit agricultural schedules and provided minimal training (Taylor 1929). Once into the migrant pattern it was almost impossible for families or individuals to break out.

The second type of employment for Chicanas, primarily those in cities and towns, was in unskilled and semi-skilled "female" jobs. The distribution of jobs varied in different areas of the Southwest, but the most common occupations in all areas were service positions (household servants, waitresses, maids, cooks, and laundry operatives), which accounted for 44.3 percent of all employed Chicanas in 1930, and operatives in garment factories and food processing plants, which together employed 19.3 percent in 1930 (Table 1). The latter industries also employed Anglo women, but Chicanas were given the worst jobs and the lowest pay. They were victims of both occupational stratification and a dual wage system. Their plight was revealed in testimony by employers before the Texas Industrial Welfare System in El Paso in 1919. For example, F. B. Fletcher, a laundry owner representing the owners of the four largest laundries in El Paso testified that almost all the unskilled labor was performed by Mexican women, while the skilled positions as markers, sorters, checkers, supervisors and office assistants went to Anglo women. Further, Mexican women were paid an average of \$6.00 a week while Anglo women received \$16.55. Fletcher argued that:

This difference indicates that in this industry, the minimum wage can be fairly fixed for Mexican female help and for the American entirely different and distinct (Garcia 1981:91).

Only by combining their wages with those of husbands and older children could Mexican-American women survive.

Whether engaged in subsistence farming, seasonal migratory labor, agricultural packing, laundry work, domestic service or garment manufacturing, Chicanas had to raise their children under colonized conditions. As part of the continued legal and illegal takeover of land by Anglos in Texas and Colorado from 1848 to 1900, the Chicanos became a conquered people (McLemore 1973, 1980). Defined and treated as inferior, their language and culture became badges of second class status. Through their daily reproductive activities and work women played a critical role not only in maintaining the family, but also in sustaining Mexican-American ways of life.

### *Black Women*

Perhaps more than any other group of women, black women were from the start exempted from the myth of female disability. To be sure, they were exploited on the basis of their gender as breeders and raisers of slaves for plantation owners (Genovese 1974). Their gender also made them liable to a special form of oppression, sexual assault. Nevertheless, their gender did not spare them from hard physical labor in the field (Jones 1984). Hooks (1981) claims plantation owners often preferred women for the hardest field work because they were the more reliable workers. In addition black women did the heavy housework and child care for white women; in that role they were subject to abuse and even physical beatings at the hands of their mistresses. As Angela Davis (1971) notes, under conditions of plantation slavery, staying alive, raising children, and maintaining some semblance of community were forms of resistance.

After emancipation, life for rural blacks remained harsh under the sharecropping system; blacks found themselves held in debt bondage. Hooks (1981) suggests that landowners preferred sharecropping to hiring labor because black women were unwilling to be employed in the fields once slavery was abolished. With sharecropping women's labor could be exploited intensively, since women had to work hard alongside the men in order to pay off the ever-mounting debt to the owner. One observer of black farmers noted that these women:

. . . do double duty, a man's share in the field, and a woman's part at home. they do any kind of field work, even ploughing, and at home the cooking, washing, milling and gardening (Lerner 1973).

Although there were some independent black farmers, it became increasingly difficult for them to make a living. Jim Crow laws deprived blacks of legal rights and protections, while national farm policies favored large landowners. Independent black farmers were increasingly impoverished and finally driven off the land (Painter 1976).

Aside from farming, the next largest group of black women were employed as laundresses and domestic servants. Black women constituted an exclusive servant caste in the South, since whites refused to enter a field associated with blacks from slave times (Katzman 1978). As servants, black women often worked a 14 to 16 hour day and were on-call round the clock (Brown 1938). They were allowed little time off to carry out their own domestic responsibilities, despite the fact that the majority of black domestics had children of their own. A married domestic might see her children once every two weeks, while devoting night and day to the care of her mistress's children. Her own children were left in the care of husband or older siblings (Katzman 1978). Low wages were endemic. They had to be supplemented by children taking in laundry or doing odd jobs. Many black women testified that they could only survive through the tradition of the service pan — the term for leftover food that was left at the disposal of the colored cook (Lerner 1973: 18).

Manufacturing and white collar jobs were closed to black women, though some of the dirtiest jobs in industry were offered to them. They were particularly conspicuous in southern tobacco factories and to some extent in cotton mills and flour manufacturing. In the cotton mills black women were employed as common laborers in the yards, as waste gatherers and as scrubbers of machinery. The actual manufacturing jobs were reserved for white women (Foner and Lewis 1981). Regarding black women in the tobacco industry, Emma Shields noted in a pamphlet she prepared for the Women's Bureau in 1922:

Conditions of employment throughout the tobacco industry are deplorably wretched, and yet conditions for Negro women workers are very much worse than those for white women workers. . . . Negro women are employed exclusively in the rehandling of tobacco, preparatory to its actual manufacture. Operations in the manufacture of cigars and cigarettes are performed exclusively by white women workers. Negro women workers are absolutely barred from any opportunity for employment in the manufacturing operations. . . . It is not unusual to find the white women workers occupying the new modern sanitary parts of the factory, and the Negro women workers in the old sections which management has decided to be beyond any hope of improvement (Quoted in Lerner 1969).

World War I saw increasing migration of blacks to the urban North and, simultaneously, the entrance of blacks into factory employment there. As late as 1910, 90.5 percent of all black women were farm laborers and servants, but between 1910 and 1920, 48,000 black women entered factory work (Lerner 1969). Most were employed in steam laundries, the rest in unmechanized jobs in industry as sweepers, cleaners and ragpickers (Foner and Lewis 1981).

During the entire period from 1870 to 1930 black women, regardless of rural or urban residence, were notable for their high rates of labor force participation, particularly among married women. In 1900, 26.0 percent of married black women were in the labor force compared to 3.8 percent of married white women (Pleck 1979). They thus had to contend with the double day long before this became an issue for a majority of white women. Moreover, although their wages were consistently lower than those of white women, their earnings constituted a larger share of total family income, due to the marginal and low wage employment of black men (Byington 1974). Finally, they had to perform their double duty in the face of poor and crowded living conditions, an educational system that provided inferior schooling for their children, uncertain income and other trials.

### RACIAL ETHNIC WOMEN'S WORK IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

All three groups are predominately urban today, a process that began in the late nineteenth century for the Chinese, during World War I for blacks and after World War II for Chicanos. All have also experienced dramatic changes in occupational distributions since 1930.

#### *Chinese Women Since World War II*

The main change in circumstance for Chinese women is that they were allowed entry to the United States in large numbers for the first time after World War II. Many separated wives were able to join their spouses under the provisions of the Walter-McCarran Act of 1953, and whole family units were able to enter after passage of the liberalized 1965 immigration law (Li 1977; U.S. Department of Justice 1977). Since World War II female immigrants outnumbered males, and the sex ratio of the Chinese population now approaches equality, with the remaining imbalance existing only in the older age categories (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1973). Women who have rejoined spouses or arrived with husbands are adapting to the post-war urban economy by entering the paid labor force. Handicapped by language, by family responsibilities and gender and race discrimination in the skilled trades, both husbands and wives are employed in the secondary labor market — in low wage service and competitive manufacturing sectors. The most typical constellation among immigrant families is a husband employed as a restaurant worker, store helper or janitor and a wife employed as an operative in a small garment shop. The shops are located in, or close to, Chinatowns and are typically subcontracting firms run by Chinese. They often evade minimum wage laws by using an unofficial piece rate system (Nee and Nee 1972).

An examination of the occupational distribution of Chinese-American women reveals a bimodal pattern. In 1970 (Table 2) Chinese women were concentrated in clerical (31.8 percent) and professional white collar work (19.4 percent), and in the operative category (22.5 percent). While the high proportion in white collar fields indicates considerable success by second, third and fourth generation women, generational mobility may be less than these figures suggest, since many professionals are actually recent immigrants of gentry origin rather than working class Chinese-Americans who have moved up. Working class Chinese women continue to be relegated to operative jobs in the garment trade. What Chinese women of all classes share is a higher than average rate of labor force participation (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1973).

**Table 2**  
**Occupational Distribution of Black, Chinese-American, Mexican-American and White Women in the United States, 1970**

Occupation	Black	Chinese-American	Mexican-American	White*
Professional	11.3	19.4	6.4	16.6
Managerial	1.4	3.8	1.9	4.0
Sales	2.6	5.1	5.7	8.1
Clerical	20.7	31.8	25.9	37.0
Craft	1.4	1.2	2.3	1.8
Operative	16.5	22.5	25.8	13.7
Laborers (excluding farm)	1.5	0.9	1.8	0.9
Farming (including farm labor)	1.2	0.5	4.0	0.7
Service	25.5	12.8	20.6	15.3
Private Household Workers	17.8	2.0	5.5	1.9
TOTAL	99.9%	100.0%	99.9%	100.0%

\*Category comprised of all women minus black and Spanish origin.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Census, *Subject Reports of the 1970 Census*: PC (2)-1B, *Negro Population*, Table 7; PC (2)-1C, *Persons of Spanish Origin*, Table 8; PC (2)-1F, *Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos in the United States*, Table 22 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973) and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population: 1970, Detailed Characteristics of the Population*, Final Report, PC (1)-D1, *U.S. Summary*, Table 226. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).

Post-war economic changes have undercut family enterprises such as laundries and small stores, so that working class families today typically engage in dual wage earning. They encounter difficulties due to the long work hours of parents and crowded and run-down housing. Working mothers are responsible for not only the lion's share of domestic chores, but often raise their children almost single-handedly. Husbands are frequently employed in the restaurant trade, which requires them to be at work from 11 in the morning until 10 in the evening or even midnight. Thus, they are rarely around while their children are awake. The women's own work hours are often prolonged because they leave work during the day to cook meals or pick up children. They make up the time

by returning to the shop for evening work or by taking materials home to sew at night (Ikels and Shang 1979). Their energy is entirely absorbed by paid employment and domestic responsibilities. The one ray of light is their hope for their children's future.

#### *Mexican-American Women*

The Chicano population is still characterized by continued migration back and forth between Mexico and the United States. In 1970, 16 percent of the resident population in the United States was foreign-born (Massey 1982:10). Not surprisingly, Chicanos remain concentrated in the Southwest, with 78 percent residing in California and Texas in 1979 (Pachon and Moore 1981). Contrary to their image as rural people, four out of five (79 percent) resided in metropolitan areas. In line with the urban shift has been a sharp reduction in the percentage of men and women engaged in agriculture. The proportion of women employed as farm workers fell from 21.2 percent in 1930 to 2.4 percent by 1979 (Tables 1 and 3). Due to the mechanization of agriculture which caused a sharp decline in the total number of farm workers, however, Chicana women constituted a higher *proportion* of women in agricultural labor in 1979 than they did in 1930. For those still involved in migrant labor, conditions remain harsh, with extensive exploitation of children, despite child labor laws (Taylor 1976).

**Table 3**  
**Occupational Distribution of Employed Black, Mexican-American and White Women, 16 Years Old and Over, 1979**

Occupation	Black*	Mexican-American	White
Professional	14.2	6.4	16.4
Managerial	3.4	3.5	6.8
Sales	3.1	5.1	7.4
Clerical	29.0	31.1	35.9
Crafts	1.2	1.8	1.9
Operatives	15.3	25.0	11.0
Laborer (excluding farm)	1.6	1.3	1.3
Farming (including farm labor)	0.8	2.4	1.3
Service (including private household)	31.5	23.4	18.1
TOTAL	100.1	100.0	100.1

\*Category consists of "black and other"

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 354, *Persons of Spanish Origin in the United States: March 1979* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), Table 10. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, 27, No. 1 (1980), Table 22.

The period from 1930 to the present saw a steady rise in the occupational status of Mexican-Americans. As with other racial ethnic groups the occupational dispersion of Chicanos is related to labor shortages during wars, especially World War II. In the post-war period, rising numbers of Chicanas found

employment in clerical and sales jobs, though they still lagged behind white women, especially in sales. The lower rates in white collar jobs were matched by over-representation in blue collar and service occupations. Mexican-American women were concentrated in operative jobs, principally in garment factories, laundries and food processing plants, which together accounted for 25.0 percent of their employment in 1979 (Table 3). These enterprises tended to be small competitive firms that paid minimum wages and were often seasonal. Another 23.4 percent of all employed Chicanas were in service jobs, including private household work.

Mexican-American women have traditionally had among the lowest rates of labor force participation among racial ethnic women (Almqvist and Wehrle-Einhorn 1978). However, in the 1970s Chicanas rapidly entered the labor market, so that by 1980 their rates were similar to that of whites, though lower than those for black and Asian-American women (Massey 1982). The lower rates may be related to two other circumstances which usually depress employment: education and family size. Chicanas have the lowest education levels of the three groups and also have the largest number of children. These factors in turn mean that when Chicanas are in the labor force, they are at a great disadvantage. In 1976 nearly one-third (31.5 percent) of all employed Chicanas had 8 years of education or less; comparable figures for blacks was 14.1 percent and for whites 7.6 percent (U.S. Department of Labor 1977).

In short, though Mexican-American women have achieved greater employment parity with Anglo women, they continue to have lower educational levels and heavier family burdens. In addition, they encounter racial barriers to white collar employment.

### *Black Women*

Black women have also experienced shifts in employment since World War II. The post war period saw a great decline in domestic service as a major category of women's work. Because black women were so concentrated in it they have shown the most dramatic decline. Whereas in 1940, three out of five (59.5 percent) employed black females were in domestic service, by 1960 that proportion had dropped to a little over a third (36.2 percent), and by 1980 to one out of fourteen (7.4 percent) (U.S. Census 1943, 1973; Westcott 1982). Partially replacing service in private households has been service employment in public establishments, particularly in food service and health care, where the number of low level jobs has proliferated. These jobs accounted for 25.4 percent of black female employment in 1980, compared to 16.0 percent of white women (Westcott 1982).

U.S. Census data (Table 3) show that black women are over-represented in the operatives category, where 15.3 percent were employed in 1979, in contrast to 11.0 percent of whites. As in the past, there is a stratified labor market and a dual wage system. Baker and Levenson (1975a) examined the careers of black, Hispanic and white graduates of a New York City vocational high school, and found that black and Hispanic women were disproportionately tracked into lower paying operative jobs in the garment industry, while better paying jobs outside the garment industry were reserved for white graduates. Years later the

difference in pay and mobility was even greater as black and Hispanic women were progressively disadvantaged (Baker and Levenson 1975b).

The last barrier to fall was white collar employment. A dramatic increase in professional-technical, clerical and sales employment took place after 1950. By 1979, the former accounted for 14.2 percent of black female employment, the latter two together for 32.1 percent. Differences remained, however, in that white collar employment accounted for over two-thirds of white women's jobs, but less than half of black women's employment. In addition, within white collar jobs, black women were concentrated in lower level jobs. For example, in 1980 black women constituted 10.8 percent of all clerical workers, but they made up over 15 percent of such lower level positions as file clerks, mail handlers, key punchers and office machine operators, and less than 6 percent of more skilled positions as secretaries, bank tellers and bookkeepers (Glenn and Tolbert 1985). In effect, though black women have experienced desegregation at the level of broad occupations, they have been re-segregated at the finer level of detailed job categories.

Other measures also show continued disadvantage for black women. They have a 50 percent higher unemployment rate and somewhat lower earnings (U.S. Department of Labor 1977). The largest gap is in terms of median family income, due to discrimination against black men. Even with the mother in the labor force, the median family income for black families with children under 18 years old was \$14,461 in 1975 compared to \$17,588 for similar white families (U.S. Department of Labor 1977). Even though they could not raise family income to white levels by being employed, black women's wages made a bigger difference to overall family income. The gap between blacks and whites was even greater if the mother was not employed: the median for black families without mothers in the labor force was \$8,912 compared to \$14,796 for whites (U.S. Department of Labor 1977). Regardless of income level, the economic fate of the black conjugal family rested on an economic partnership between men and women. Moreover, even among relatively affluent black families, the need to combat racism was a theme that infused daily life and absorbed the energy of parents in socializing their children (Willie 1981). Women's role as nurturers required them to combat the daily assaults on their children's self-esteem and to be vigilant in protecting them from psychic injury.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST ANALYSIS

The history of racial-ethnic women's work in the United States reveals their oppression not just as women, but also as members of colonized minorities. As members of colonized minorities, their experiences differed fundamentally from those used to construct Marxist-feminist theory. Thus, concepts within that framework require reformulation if it is to generate analyses that are inclusive of racial ethnic women. I will briefly examine three concepts in Marxist-feminist theory that need to be redefined to take into account the interaction of race and gender. These are the separation between private and public spheres, the primacy of gender conflict as a feature of the family, and the gender-based assignment of reproductive labor.



The growing separation of public and private spheres with industrialization was central to early Marxist-feminist analyses of women's oppression under capitalism. However, recent historical and comparative research has called into question the extent to which private and public constituted separate and bounded spheres for all classes and groups. Scholars note that in industrializing societies working class women engage in many income-earning activities, such as doing piece-work at home, taking in boarders, or trading on the informal market, which cannot be easily categorized as private or public (Jensen 1980). Moreover, industrial wage work and family life have been found to interact in complex ways, so that, for example, women's family roles may include and overlap with their roles as workers (Harevan 1977). The examination of racial ethnic women's work adds to the critiques growing out of this research.

The nature of the split, and the extent to which women are identified with the public sphere, seems to vary by class and ethnicity, and differences among groups in women's relationship to public and private spheres needs to be examined. Like many other working class women, racial ethnic women were never out of public production. They were integrated into production in varying ways. Black women were involved in agriculture and waged domestic service from the time of slavery. Chinese-American women frequently engaged in unpaid labor in family enterprises, where there was little separation between public and private life. Mexican-American women were initially more confined to household based labor than the other groups, but this labor included a great deal of actual production, since men's wages were insufficient to purchase the necessities of life. Thus, a definition of womanhood exclusively in terms of domesticity never applied to racial ethnic women, as it did not to many working class women.

Where racial ethnic women diverge from other working class women is that, as members of colonized minorities, their definition as laborers in production took precedence over their domestic roles. Whereas the wife-mother roles of white working class women were recognized and accorded respect by the larger society, the maternal and reproductive roles of racial ethnic women were ignored in favor of their roles as workers. The lack of consideration for their domestic functions is poignantly revealed in the testimony of black domestics cited earlier, who were expected to leave their children and home cares behind while devoting full-time to the care of the white employer's home and children. Similarly, Chinese and Mexican-American women and children were treated as units of labor, capable of toiling long hours without regard to their need for private life. This is not to say that racial ethnic women themselves did not see themselves in terms of their family identities, but that they were not so defined by the larger society, which was interested in them only as workers.

Another area of divergence is in the scope of what is included in the so-called private sphere. For racial ethnic women the domestic encompasses a broad range of kin and community relations beyond the nuclear family. Under conditions of economic insecurity, scarce resources and cultural assault, the conjugal household was not self-sufficient. Racial and ethnic peoples have historically relied on a larger network of extended kin, including fictive relatives and clan associations, for goods and services. This means that women's reproductive work in the "private" sphere included contributions to

this larger circle, within which women took care of each others' children, loaned each other goods, and helped nurse the sick. Beyond the kin network women's work extended to the ethnic community, with much effort being expended in support of the church, political organizing and other activities on behalf of "the race" (*la raza*). Women are often the core of community organizations, and their involvement is often spurred by a desire to defend their children, their families and their ways of life (Ellesar et al 1980; Gilkes 1981; Yap 1983). In short, race, as organized within a colonial labor system, interacted with gender (patriarchy) and class (capitalism) to determine the structure of private and public spheres and women's relationship to these spheres.

A second aspect of Marxist-feminist theory that requires reformulation in light of race is the concept of the family as a locus of gender conflict. The Marxist-feminist analysis of the family is a response to traditional approaches that treat the family as an entity with unitary interests; in particular, it challenges the functionalist view of the division of labor as complementary rather than exploitative. By focusing on inequality — the economic dependence of women and the inequitable division of labor — some Marxist-feminists see members of the family as divided in their interests, with conflict manifested in a struggle over resources and housework (e.g. Hartmann 1981b; Thorne 1982; for a contrasting view, see Humphries 1977). In this view the conjugal family oppresses women; the liberation of women requires freeing them from familial authority and prescribed roles.

Examination of racial ethnic women's experiences draws attention to the other side of the coin — the family as a source of resistance to oppression from outside institutions.<sup>3</sup> The colonial labor system made it impossible for men of color to support their families with their labor alone and therefore ruled out economic dependence for women. The issue for racial ethnic women was not so much economic equality with husbands, but rather the adequacy of overall family income. Because racial ethnic men earned less, women's wages comprised a larger share of total family income in dual wage-earner families. In the case of family enterprises, common among Asian-Americans, family income depended on the labor of men and women equally. Thus, in both dual wage-earner and small business families, men and women were mutually dependent; dependence rarely ran in one direction.

As for the division of household labor, Marxist-feminist analysis sees it as benefitting men, who receive a greater share of services while contributing less labor. In the racial ethnic family, conflict over the division of labor is muted by the fact that institutions outside the family are hostile to it. The family is a bulwark against the atomizing effects of poverty and legal and political constraints. By transmitting folkways and language, socializing children into an alternative value system, and providing a base for self-identity and esteem, the family helps to maintain racial ethnic culture. Women do a great deal of the work of keeping the family together and teaching children survival skills. This work is experienced as a form of resistance to oppression rather than as a form of exploitation by men. In the colonial situation the common interest of family members in survival, the maintenance of family authority, and the continuation of cultural traditions are emphasized. This is not to say that there are no

conflicts over the division of labor but struggles against outside forces take precedence over struggles within the family. Thus, the racial stratification system shapes the forms of intra-familial and extra-familial conflict, and determines the arenas in which struggle occurs.

A third concept in Marxist-feminist theory that would benefit from consideration of race oppression is the very useful notion of reproductive labor. Following an early brief formulation by Marx, Marxist-feminists identified two distinct forms of labor, production and reproduction (Sokoloff 1980). Reproduction refers to activities that recreate the labor force: the physical and emotional maintenance of current workers and the nurturing and socializing of future workers. In other words, people as well as things have to be produced. Although both men and women engage in production, women are still the ones who carry out most of the reproduction. In large part this is because much reproductive work remains at the household level, which is women's domain. In considering the situation of racial ethnic women, it is useful to recognize the existence of a racial as well as a sexual division of reproductive labor. Historically, racial ethnic women have been assigned distinct responsibilities for reproductive labor.

In the early industrial period racial ethnic and immigrant women were employed as household servants, thereby performing reproductive labor for white native families. The labor of black and immigrant servants made possible the woman belle ideal for white middle class women. Even where white immigrant domestics were employed, the dirtiest and most arduous tasks, laundering and heavy cleaning — were often assigned to black servants. There was a three-way division of labor in the home, with white middle class women at the top of the hierarchy, followed by white immigrants, with racial ethnics at the bottom. In the late industrial period, as capital took over more areas of life, reproductive activities also were increasingly taken out of the household and turned into paid services which yielded profits (Braverman 1974). Today, such activities as caring for the elderly (old age homes) preparing food (restaurants and fast food stands) and providing emotional support (counselling services) have been brought into the cash nexus. As this has happened, women have been incorporated into the labor force to perform these tasks for wages. Within this female-typed public reproduction work, however, there is further stratification by race. Racial ethnic women perform the more menial, less desirable tasks. They prepare and serve food, clean rooms and change bed pans, while white women, employed as semi-professionals and white collar workers, perform the more skilled and administrative tasks. The stratification is visible in hospitals, where whites predominate among registered nurses, while the majority of health care aides and housekeeping staff are blacks and latinas. Just as white women in tobacco manufacturing benefitted by getting cleaner and more mechanized jobs by dint of the dirty preparation work done by black women, so white women professionals enjoy more desirable working conditions because racial ethnic women perform the less desirable service tasks. The better pay white women receive also allows them to purchase services and goods that ease their reproductive labor at home.

This point leads to a final consideration. It may be tempting to conclude that racial ethnic women differ from white women simply by the addition of a

second axis of oppression, namely race. It would be a mistake though, not to recognize the dialectical relation between white and racial ethnic women. Race, gender and class interact in such a way that the histories of white and racial ethnic women are intertwined. Whether one considers the split between public and private spheres, conflict within the family and between the family and outside institutions or productive and reproductive labor, the situation of white women has depended on the situation of women of color. White women have gained advantages from the exploitation of racial ethnic women, and the definition of white womanhood has to a large extent been cast in opposition to the definition of racial ethnic women (Palmer 1983). Marxist-feminist theory and the internal colonialism model both recognize white men as the dominant exploiting group; however it is equally important to emphasize the involvement of white women in the exploitation of racial ethnic people and the ways in which racial ethnic men have benefitted from the even greater exploitation of racial ethnic women.

## NOTES

1. The term racial ethnic designates groups that are simultaneously racial and ethnic minorities. It is used here to refer collectively to blacks, latinos and Asian-Americans, groups that share a legacy of labor exploitation and special forms of oppression described in the body of this paper. It is offered as an alternative to more commonly used designations, viz. minority groups, people of color and Third World minorities, each of which is problematic at some level.
2. Sokoloff (1980) points out that whereas earlier Marxist feminists viewed gender oppression as a by-product of capitalism, what she calls "later" Marxists feminists developed the concept of patriarchy as a separate system that pre-dated capitalism and that interacts with class exploitation under capitalism.
3. This general line of argument may also apply to white working class families. However, I would assert that there were crucial differences in the historical experiences of white working class and racial ethnic families. The family system of the white working class was not subject to institutional attacks (such as forced separation) directed against black, Chicano and Chinese families. Moreover white working class women were accorded some respect for their domestic roles.

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## Autonomy and Dependency in the Lives of Dakota Women: A Study in Historical Change

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines certain theoretical issues bearing upon the relationship between race, class and household as these impact the role and status of women. In doing so, it presents a case study of historical contradictions that have influenced the experiences of Dakota women during the past century.

### INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that sexism is a pervasive feature of the modern division of labor, or that the dimensions of sexism differ across class and racial lines. In the United States women of color are disadvantaged not only because they are women but because they are members of a specific racial group. Racial status serves as an institutionalized marker for segregation in an economy where women of color are concentrated in the lowest paying jobs, have high levels of unemployment and constitute a disproportionate number of the females living in poverty (Lewis 1977; Mora and del Castillo 1980; Puryear 1980; Albers 1983a; Davis 1983; Stallard, Ehrenreich and Sklar 1983).

The poverty under which many women of color live has a significant impact on their household life (Stack 1974; Aschenbrenner 1975; McAdoo 1981; Albers 1982; Ybarra 1982). Class and its dynamics explain many aspects of domestic poverty and its consequences for women's lives. However, it does not always explain why poor American Indian, black, Asian, hispanic, and white women experience the impact of domestic poverty in different ways. Such variation raises important questions about the role of race and ethnicity in women's lives.

This paper examines relationships between race and class as these bear upon the changing position of American Indian women within the developing capitalist United States political economy. Using data drawn primarily from my own research,<sup>1</sup> it focuses on a group of Dakota women whose collective experiences over the past century reveal a great deal about the dynamics of gender, race, and class in the organization of domestic groupings.

### HOUSEHOLDS, CLASS, AND RACE: SOME THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

There is a general consensus among feminist scholars that gender is a social construct informed by the historical settings in which women experience their

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