

the decision to have a ceremony. For others, the ceremony was seen as the culmination of the lesbian relationship, where one "popped the question" or "proposed" to the other. Lesbians had to sort through the questions of who "proposed," of rings, of whether one was to be "given away," of permission of parents to "marry," of whether or not to have children, of roles during the ceremony and of monogamy as a part of the on-going lesbian relationship.

Ceremonies of the Heart provides a starting point for further research on the liberation of lesbians from patriarchal prohibitions, including the prohibition of same-sex "marriages." Essential questions for further research include: Are "pro-union" attitudes common amongst lesbians? Why are there few role models or models of ceremonies for lesbians seeking a union or commitment experience? How and why do some lesbian ceremonies parallel those available in the straight (heterosexual) world? What do words like *union*, *commitment*, *family*, and *bonding* really mean to lesbians? What is the meaning of unions and long-term "couplesdom" to lesbians in a social world that is antagonistic to them?

While Butler's work does not answer all the questions that need to be asked about union ceremonies, it serves as an excellent resource for the "pro-union" parts of both the lesbian and gay communities.

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Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth Century New York. Nancy Grey Osterud. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, Pp. 303.

This book is a carefully crafted historical study challenging the notion of women's culture and the ideology of separate spheres as organizing principles for understanding women's work. Instead of continuing to use these concepts, which for many feminists have been instrumental in reclaiming

women's visibility in history and developing women's history, Nancy Grey Osterud draws on Linda Kerber's recent work on the history of the use of separate spheres as an ideology¹ and, in turn, frames her own writing with ideas about mutuality and shared spheres.

In Osterud's description and interpretation of life in New York's Nanticoke Valley in the 1800s, she argues that mutuality based on kinship and community labour sharing in a rural household economy was consequential to women's participation in the household, in rural organizations (both formal and informal) and in social and economic life. This mutuality, she further argues, was consequential to rural social and economic development and supported a rural understanding of women's equality.

Osterud highlights the positive aspects of bonding or the drawing together of people instead of focusing on the aspects of bondage (referred to in the title of the book²) which made life difficult for women (such as lack of access to property ownership, differential formal rights, decreased wages, and occupational restrictions). This bonding of the community through mutuality was, Osterud argues, based on an organization of family and household and women's importance in that organization.

As Rayna Rapp³ has demonstrated earlier, households were not based on universal rules but rather on normative rules governing household formations in specific cultural contexts. In the context of the nineteenth-century Nanticoke Valley of New York, flexible, shared labouring and responsibilities between women and men and between households contributed to a rich and textured social life rather than a life of drudgery for women.

Like most contemporary feminists, Osterud redefines work to include all activities of both women and men — not just those valued by a capitalist economic system. She also provides an explanation based on the specific case of the transition from a household production economy to capitalist market economy, upon which different systems of evalua-

tion of activities and exchange simultaneously occurred. Osterud very successfully delineates the historical differences in systems of valuation between goods and services produced for the household and those produced for the market. In various exchanges of goods and labour under different conditions, these exchanges could be given value not only in terms of cash or credit but also in terms of reciprocity, sharing and/or social sanction. Osterud's emphasis on social customs, especially her chapter on patterns of sociability, is especially useful as a method for reconstructing ordinary lives as part of a larger social and economic transformation.

Osterud's focus on mutuality, flexibility and interdependence does not preclude a recognition by Osterud that, for women, much of their labouring was more flexible than men's. This is to say that women in rural households were available to take part in, support, and often replace the seasonal work that men did in the barnyards and the fields. While men and women shared this work and even divided some of the responsibilities, especially in the barn and yard, on the basis of personal preference rather than by gender norms, men were far less likely to take part in the daily, multidimensional domestic work of the rural household. Even here, however, there were exceptions to a strict division of labour by sex, especially when women were sick or unable to complete their tasks due to their heavier burdens.

Osterud successfully distinguishes her work from the work of other feminists focusing on women's culture. Replacing the notion of women's culture with the perspective of mutuality, Osterud does not obscure the inequality for women in the Nanticoke Valley of the nineteenth century. Her ability to reconstruct the past without losing a women-centred focus, all the while not using the concept of women's culture, is admirable. She has also demonstrated that women were not impassive dupes being acted upon solely by outside forces. Impressive is her careful and innovative scholarship and her own challenge to other feminist scholars to examine the world of men, women and children as the one in which we all live.

Still, Osterud's challenge to the idea of women's culture was the most unsettling aspect of this book for me. Osterud noted that, although conflict and difference were present, it was also suppressed in the Nanticoke Valley communities she was studying. Her framework, emphasizing unanimity and mutuality as community values having social and economic development consequences, could, in the hands of a less skilled writer, obscure practices of inequality. If Osterud's framework can be used to expand the definition of women's culture beyond the creation of a women's separate culture within a restricted sphere, then Osterud is to be applauded. If it is used to deny the need for an expanded women's culture in all spheres, then that reading of her work would be unfortunate and not, I believe, what she intended.

Osterud's challenge is also unsettling in that it evokes the larger question of strategy and politics in the building of women's culture in the contemporary feminist movement. While this book is a historical study of a very different time with a very different social and economic context from the present, I could not help but extrapolate to the intense debates of the present over questions of strategy, especially as they are argued in the rural context. The question here is whether it is strategically more useful to focus on similarity or difference between women and between women and men in the fight for equality, and on a more just and equitable distribution of societal resources. Whether to work in this struggle solely with women, and with *which* women, or with women and men, is also part of the question.

The answer to these questions usually depends on the situation, the issues, the actors, the politics, the time and the place. Unfortunately, alliances with men which are most often necessary and inevitable often have the disadvantage of taking place in a culture of social and economic inequality in which women have to work hard to maintain a formally equal partnership and to realign divisions of work. How and when women use mutuality as a strategy often depends on the context.

Osterud asserts that the women in the Nanticoke Valley were conscious of their strategies of mutuality and inclusiveness in attempting to expand their spheres of influence (p. 192). From my reading of her book, it is difficult to ascertain from her evidence whether this was a strategy of conscious choice rather than one of required social and economic necessity and cultural conditioning.

Readers may respond differently to the questions of perspective, emphasis, and strategy that Osterud raises. However one responds, they will most certainly be aware of Osterud's careful use of detail to situate specific circumstances in the historical past. For me, Osterud was successful in making me feel uncomfortable enough in the reading to rethink interpretations of the historical past and present. While I might argue with her perspective in certain cases or want to challenge it with other interpretations about social relations in inherently patriarchal relationships, I, however, do appreciate the usefulness of her analysis. Osterud successfully demonstrates the theoretical usefulness and complexity of any analysis centred on the lives of men and women which holds the contradictions of mutuality and conflict in tension. She is clear in demonstrating that social and economic worlds are populated by men, women and children.

NOTES

1. Kerber, L.K. (1988). Separate spheres, female worlds, woman's place: The rhetoric of women's history. *Journal of American History*, (June 1988), 9-39.
2. Osterud refers to the use of bonds as a double metaphor. She credits her choice of the terminology to Sarah M. Grimke's use of the term in 1838 and Nancy F. Cott's subsequent reinterpretation of Grimke's and others' use of the term.
3. Rapp, R. (1982). Family and class in contemporary America: Notes toward an understanding of ideology. In B. Thorne & M. Yalom (Eds.), *Rethinking the family: Some feminist questions*. New York: Longman.

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Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics. bell hooks. 1990.

Bell hook's *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* is a sober treasure of a book. Hooks, a scholar of African-American and feminist studies, is smart about the clever extension of Western consumerist capitalism and imperialism that is fuelling so much interest in "blackness" these days. She will not be persuaded by some of her popular black critics that patriarchy can simply be dealt with through black liberation struggle.

However, the isolation African-American feminists have experienced in Western culture and in the academy is a bit frightening to behold. Think about that fact and the recent Gulf War, and few progressives can help feeling that Western tradition cannot be wounded either too quickly or too deeply by diasporic African intellectuals like hooks or by the (careerist) white male postmoderns who hooks uneasily hails in *Yearning*.

Although hooks' intellectual alliance with postmodernism in *Yearning* is firm (and welcome, in my opinion), it will be an irritant to those radical, liberal or socialist feminist fans of hooks' previous books who still feel that postmodernism is simply "designer socialism." Hooks herself acidly notes the absence of works by African-American scholars in the reference notes and bibliographies of American essay collections on postmodernism (including feminist ones). Furthermore, she makes it clear that diasporic African intellectuals in America, whose ancestors suffered the trauma of slavery and segregation and whose brothers and sisters still suffer class injustice in disproportionate numbers, initially find the trendy cultural fragmentation of Western postmodernism depressing.

The "yearning" in the title of her book represents hooks' hope that the new spaces of transformative cultural critique opened up by privileged white male postmoderns can be recouped by African-American cultural critics as a site for renewed