In every modern conflict, in every part of the world, women have participated in war-making. They have debated the causes of war, supported war, and opposed war. They have fought in battle in disguise, and, in recent times, openly in combat. They have engaged in espionage, and they have created propaganda. They have managed businesses on the home front, and they have treated the sick and wounded. They have served as symbols of the causes their nations represent. They have helped shape collective memory by preserving artifacts, raising money for monuments, and founding memorial organizations. There is an abundant scholarship on all of these topics, for many countries.¹

The scholarship on women in the American Civil War is also bountiful, large enough to generate many reference books, collections of essays, published primary documents, and synthetic works. The literature grows larger every year. In this essay, I cannot discuss every publication, but I will focus on principal themes in the


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historiography and suggest possibilities for further research. Serious scholarship began with Mary Elizabeth Massey, who published three monographs between 1952 and 1966: *Ersatz in the Confederacy, Refugee Life in the Confederacy, and Bonnet Brigades*. She wanted to dispel the notion that women watched as men waged war, and she described the involvement of white and black women in the war efforts, North and South, with an emphasis on the wide range of experience. Some years later, in 1989, George C. Rable published a superb monograph on white Southern women, *Civil Wars*. He demonstrated that the war upended their lives, and although they wavered in supporting the Confederacy, they ultimately did not question the status quo on gender and race. In 1992, Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber presented a volume of essays, *Divided Houses*, which shows that while the War affected women in diverse ways, depending on region, race, and class, it nevertheless touched everyone. The books by Rable, Clinton, and Silber had a galvanizing effect on the field, and it has thrived ever since.2

Before 1861, all American women had to contend with the idea that they should stay out of politics and concentrate on domesticity. Wars often break down distinctions between public and private life, however, and the Civil War was no exception. Much of the work on the South concerns elite white women, who left behind numerous manuscripts. Historians have returned to the question, did these patricians support the Confederacy? Scholars have found that most of them felt enthusiastic in the beginning, but many became disillusioned and withdrew their support; Drew Gilpin Faust believes that their withdrawal helps explain the Confederate defeat. Those elite women who supported the Confederacy assisted the cause by managing plantations, running hospitals, and nursing the sick and wounded, while others rendered political aid by writing novels praising the Confederacy.3


Scholarship on working-class white women in Dixie, who constituted the majority of the region's white female population, is less plentiful because they created fewer records. The evidence shows nevertheless that class differences had a profound effect on their lives; these women inhabited a different political universe. Many, if not most, of them opposed the Confederacy starting in 1861. Victoria Bynum and Stephanie McCurry both argue that women of the yeoman class saw themselves as part of the “people” writ large. These female unionists nursed wounded Yankees and spied for the federal army, sometimes with the help of slaves. They helped deserters and draft evaders, for which some of them were assaulted or tortured by rebel officers. The wartime shortages of various goods hit them harder, and they engaged in an increasingly desperate struggle for survival, stealing from affluent whites and attacking Confederate warehouses.4

Historians of white Northern women have emphasized how these women supported the Yankee victory, perhaps because the North won the contest. These women believed, as Jeanie Attie suggests, that their toil was patriotic, and they engaged in practical labor, such as organizing soldiers' aid societies, as well as rhetorical labor, writing works of fiction to advocate the Union cause. Hundreds of white Northern women, by one estimate, fought in disguise in the Yankee army. (The numbers for white Southern women appear to be smaller.) There has been little work on white females who opposed the War, although Judith Giesberg notes that some rioted against conscription and physically attacked draft agents. The number of black Northern women was small, and the number of manuscripts correspondingly small, but we know that they volunteered for soldiers’ aid societies and did relief work. Yet others confronted wartime bigotry inside the region and sued to desegregate the street cars in Northern cities.5


When historians of African American women discuss emancipation, the war’s greatest achievement, they tend to endorse the view that slaves freed themselves, rather than Abraham Lincoln or the Union army. They also demonstrate how slaveowners tried to prevent bondswomen from fleeing, even as the rebel army exploited the slave population, and how Yankee troops revealed decidedly mixed opinions on emancipation. Slave women were more vulnerable than slave men in their transition to freedom, subject to sexual abuse from white men in both armies. Despite their hardships, some black women developed a strong sense of their own citizenship. In the Border State of Missouri, freedwomen sued in military court to reclaim their children in bondage.6

In the light of so much turmoil, historians have asked, did the war change gender roles? The answer varies by region, race, and class; generalizations are hard to come by. Mary Massey asserts that the war advanced the cause of white Northern women by fifty years, while George Rable argues that traditional roles snapped back into place for white women in the postwar South. LeeAnn Whites counters that the war provoked a crisis in gender for elite white Southerners, since the men failed at waging war and therefore failed their women; after 1865, these women embraced a new public status by engaging in memorial work and related activities. Gender roles had always been more flexible for slave women, partly because they had to labor outside the home, so they perceived the issue differently. The war allowed newly freed women to concentrate fully on domestic life, which many of them were eager to do, and to live without the interference of whites of either gender.7

The field has produced some excellent biographies, many of which reveal how individuals seized the war’s opportunities. Again, there is more scholarship on white women, especially on the vivid personalities who poured themselves into the war effort: Elizabeth Van Lew, the unionist spy in Richmond; Louisa Cheves McCord, the pro-slavery ideologue from South Carolina; and Mary Livermore, the Union army nurse, often quoted by scholars. Biographers have turned up some fascinating paradoxes about the First Ladies, neither of whom


served as effective symbols for their causes. Mary Todd Lincoln, most recently the subject of a deft study by Stacy Pratt McDermott, hailed from the Southern elite and had relatives in both armies; Varina Howell Davis (Mrs. Jefferson Davis) is best characterized as a conservative unionist, and she too had relatives in both armies. Other compelling personalities have yet to find a biographer. Despite Julia Stern’s impressive insights on the cultural themes in Mary Chesnut’s Richmond journal, there is no satisfactory, full-length treatment of the iconoclast who penned one of the best Civil War diaries.8

We have fewer biographies of black women in either region, with the exception of Harriet Tubman, the fugitive from Maryland who has been the subject of many works aimed at a popular audience. The war made both Tubman and Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave from New York, famous nationwide, although they were already well-known among reformers. These charismatic women also threw themselves into the Union cause. Tubman rescued slaves in South Carolina, recruited for the federal army, and served as an army scout, while Truth collected supplies for black troops and worked in refugee camps. We still need a biography of Charlotte Forten Grimké, a Northerner who kept detailed journals about teaching fugitive slaves in the South. The diary of Emilie Davis, a working-class black woman in Philadelphia, is a rare find; she is already the subject of two books which show her deep interest in the war as it unfolded.9

As for future research, any scholarship on African American women is welcome, especially on how emancipation happened at the granular level on farms and plantations. Not enough work has been done on Native Americans beyond Carolyn Ross Johnston’s Cherokee Women in Crisis or on women from ethnic and religious minorities. We can build on the extant scholarship on women and cultural history, similar to Julia Stern’s book, addressing the ways that music and


the performing arts became politicized during the war, and the significance of material culture, such as the symbolism inherent in women's clothing for both races. This intellectual endeavor, which has been booming for three decades, will no doubt continue to enrich our understanding of the Civil War.  
