PART 1

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

More than ten years ago, I introduced the first edition of this anthology with these words:

When we visualize the history of the Pacific Northwest, we can quickly reconstruct the roles that men played. Early explorers, trappers, missionaries, traders, the Indian chiefs, loggers, sailors, pioneer farmers, miners, businessmen, and aeronautical engineers—all these leap easily to mind. Women are conspicuously absent from the colorful pictures that rise before us. Yet how considerably this omission distorts the truth. The bias that has dismissed women's varied and critical contributions to Washington and Oregon history begs for correction.

The 1988 edition of Women in Pacific Northwest History attempted to rectify the imbalance. Yet in the course of the '90s, new research emerged to broaden and deepen our knowledge and analysis of women's historical experience in Washington and Oregon. I am delighted to include new essays by Susan Armitage on historiography, Mary Cross on quilts, and Jerry García on Chicanas and to reprint here material by David Peterson del Mar on domestic violence, Maurine Weiner Greenwald on women and unions, Sylvia Van Kirk on Native American wives of fur traders, and my own case study of a Seattle music club. This edition spans a much wider spectrum of history, from late-eighteenth-century traders to the modern Chicana experience.

I am sorry that it is not possible to include many other fine contributions,
including the work of Lillian Schlissel on the Mallek family, Lorraine McConaghy on conservative women of the Seattle suburbs in the 1950s, Mildred Andrews on women’s places in King County, Washington, Ron Fields on the painter Abby Williams Hill, Mary Dodds Schlick on Columbia River women’s basketry, Sandra Haarsager on women’s voluntary organizations and on Mayor Bertha Landes, Julie Roy Jeffrey on the missionary Narcissa Whitman, G. Thomas Edwards on the fight for woman suffrage, Dana Frank on union activists, Jacqueline Williams on pioneer cooking, Nancy Woloch on the landmark Supreme Court case *Muller v. Oregon* (ushering in protective legislation for women), Wayne Carp on adoption, Amy Kesselman on defense workers during World War II, Catherine Parsons Smith and Cynthia Richardson on the composer Mary Carr Moore, Linda Di Biase on the Seattle years of the writer Sui Sin Far, Marilyn Watkins on rural women, and Vicki Halprin on women painters. The scope and strength of recent scholarship makes for a delightful dilemma: rather than offer a comprehensive overview of the literature, I have identified five areas for consideration: New Directions for Research, Politics and Law, Work, Race and Ethnicity, and the Arts.

The following bibliographical essay by Susan Armitage, with dozens of useful suggestions for further study, catalogs the growing sophistication of recent scholarship in the field of Northwest women’s history. Scholars are no longer content to embellish traditional histories of the accomplishments of Northwest men with biographies of a few unusual women who mastered skills generally acquired by men, such as the cowgirls, the Roman Catholic missionary and architect Mother Joseph, and the Socialist Anna Louise Strong.

Nor are they willing to flag a few exemplary exponents of “women’s work” in such arenas as volunteerism, motherhood, or teaching, the traditional roles for women. Instead, Armitage pushes us to note the viewpoints of new research, especially in the context of women’s relationships to others, observing the nuances that gender as well as race and class effect. She reminds us that women are employees of bosses, employers of workers, wives to husbands, mothers to children. They are farmers of the land, missionaries to the Native Americans, trappers for the fur traders, authors to readers, teachers to students, nurses to patients, mayors to constituents, neighbors to neighbors. They manage convents, households, farms, and missions. By surveying new scholarship for women’s relationships in six categories, Armitage enables us to embrace the complexity of women’s interactions with their world and assess the impact they have made in history.

Happily, even as they are printed, her suggestions grow outdated. New scholarship emerges daily to address topics deserving exploration. Several new
studies on neglected subjects will become available in the future to students of Northwest women’s history. Among those will be Frances Sneed-Jones’s research on African American women’s clubs, Susan Starbuck’s study of the environmentalist Hazel Wolf, Doris Pieroth’s study of mid-twentieth-century women educators, and Gail Dubrow’s program to map the spaces utilized by Washington’s minority women. We can look forward to a twenty-first century in which women’s history continues to enjoy exploration as a vital part of Northwest scholarship.
Tied To Other Lives:  
Women in Pacific Northwest History

SUSAN ARMITAGE

I never set out to deliberately de-mythologize the West, but . . .  
when you try to make your characters real and layered and tied  
to other lives in other places—your work has the inevitable effect  
of dismantling the myth of the West as the home of heroic, loner  
white guys moving through an unpeopled and uncomplicated place.

Deirdre McNamer

S ome facts are so obvious that we tend to forget them, and one is that the  
Pacific Northwest could not have been a site of continued human habitation without women. Women are essential in all societies: they assure continuity physically by birthing the next generation and psychologically by raising the children who claim the land and build lasting communities on it. Once we understand how basic the presence of women has been to the Pacific Northwest, we can begin to see history through their eyes. As we do that we will find, as the Montana author Dierdre McNamer did, that women’s lives are “real and layered and tied to other lives in other places.” That realization requires us to think of Pacific Northwest history in new ways. This essay begins with a background sketch showing how women’s historians have come to understand the significance of gender relationships. Building on that knowledge, the essay shows the importance of gender relationships in six different areas: the lives of American Indian women, intercultural relations, Euro-American migration and settlement, social reform, labor, and community building. The larger goal of the essay is to demonstrate the way in which the focus on relationships provides a basic conceptual framework for the study of Pacific Northwest history.

As women’s history has developed over the past thirty years into a major field within American history, ways of thinking about women in historical terms have changed. At first, in the 1970s, women’s historians concentrated on recovering the lives of overlooked women—first the famous ones, and then lesser-known ones—and adding them to the historical record. As the historical details
of women’s lives were recovered, it became obvious that appropriate female behavior (often summed up in the term *womanhood*) was not an unchanging ideal but a concept that changed from one historical period to the next. Sometimes the changes were abrupt, as in the 1920s when the cigarette-smoking flapper with her short skirts and bobbed hair repudiated her mother’s long skirts, long hair, and modest behavior. Sometimes the changes were slower, as in the long struggle for woman suffrage. It took almost a century for women to convince men that females should vote. As women’s historians were working to put women into history, feminist cultural anthropologists were discovering that there was wide variety in the meanings that different cultures have given to sexual difference. Building on this insight, the historian Joan Scott’s influential 1986 article, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” proposed gender as a basic analytic category, as important as other commonly used historical concepts like race and class. Scott observed that the way a particular society defines the difference between the sexes—gender—is the key to understanding other relationships of difference and power within that society.

Women’s historians now believe that gender relationships are what hold a culture together. You might say that it all begins at home. The way a particular culture views the difference between the sexes shapes relationships between husband and wife and between parents and children and establishes a gendered division of labor within the family and in its wider kinship network. The gender relationships that operate at a personal and individual level structure people’s expectations about the connections between private and public power and their understanding of how those power relationships operate. For example, in the highly patriarchal world of colonial America, women were defined as inferior and dependent upon men. Women did not expect to play leadership roles in public matters such as politics or formal religious observances. With the exception of a few famous rebels like Anne Hutchinson, colonial women knew that their roles were subordinate and private. But in differently organized groups, such as American Indian societies where the kinship network was paramount, power was often so diffused as to be hard to locate, the difference between public and private was small, and women assumed a wide variety of roles. As these brief examples show, attention to gender relationships offers historians a new and powerful way to understand the power relationships within a given society.

At a more personal level, individuals rarely think to question the family relationships, work roles, and public power structures of their own society, and they are surprised when they discover different gender relationships in other cultural groups. For example, when Phoebe Judson pioneered the
Nooksack Valley with her family in the 1880s, she felt a strong “bond of womanhood” with the Lummi woman she knew as “Old Sally,” arising out of their common concerns for their children and family. But for all their commonalities, the two women were, as Phoebe realized, very different. She thought it was because she and her family had progressed to a “higher stage of civilization” than Sally and her fellow Lummis. We, however, can see that each woman was embedded in a different gender relationship. They inhabited different networks of power relationships, beginning with marriage and kinship ties and patterns of economic livelihood, widening outward to relationships among different races and access to economic opportunities and political power. Their expectations about how people should interact were based on their own gender relationships, specific to their own societies. Given these unarticulated differences, it is no wonder that cultural misunderstandings and conflicts were so prevalent when white pioneers interacted with American Indian peoples.

By focusing on the gender relationships of different cultural groups, historians can link the life of an individual woman or man to larger generalizations about the public issues with which regional history is concerned. Family and kinship relationships are replicated in the ways communities are organized, and that organization in turn shapes politics at the nonlocal level. Gender thus gives us a way to understand the link between the lives of ordinary people and great national events, such as, for example, the role shifts that occurred during World War II when many young men went off to war and their wives took new and unaccustomed jobs in Pacific Northwest shipyards and airplane factories. Above all, we now have a way to think about how relationships of gender, race, and class interact when peoples of different races and cultures, such as Phoebe and Sally, and Euro-American pioneers and indigenous peoples, met in the Pacific Northwest.

There is much about the history of Pacific Northwest Indian societies before contact with Europeans that we will never know, but gender analysis gives us a place to start. Women’s history has taught us that for most women work and kinship have been intimately related. In Pacific Northwest Indian societies, the tribal unit was a kinship network that cooperated to gather, hunt, fish, and grow the food necessary for life. We can easily see how work and kinship interacted in the lives of Indian women. Or we would, if the male anthropologists who did the early studies of Pacific Northwest Indian groups had paid more attention to women’s work!

From scanty sources, we can begin to piece together an outline of women’s lives before white contact. The Plateau tribes (so called because of their location in the interior Pacific Northwest) followed a seasonal round of gather-
ing, hunting, and fishing activities. Women provided about half the food supply, a finding that is consistent with worldwide reconsideration of the importance of women’s activities in so-called hunter-gatherer societies. All tribal work was strictly gender-divided, but there was no indication that men’s work was regarded more highly than women’s work. Nor in the ceremonial and religious aspects of life did there appear to be much gender difference. It is difficult to fully grasp the worldview that life in such tight-knit, traditional societies produced, but one route is through serious appreciation of Indian art. A book such as Mary Schlick’s Columbia River Basketry: Gift of the Ancestors, Gift of the Earth shows us the ways in which all aspects of life—work, religion, and kinship—came together in the baskets that women wove. Baskets were practical implements of daily life and work, but the skill with which women wove them, their decoration, and their wider uses had important religious and symbolic meaning to the native peoples of the Columbia River. Another splendid example of the connection between culture and women’s arts is offered in A Song to the Creator: Traditional Arts of
Native American Women of the Plateau. One of the most important contributions of this book is its recognition of cultural continuity: women’s traditional arts are still practiced today.9

The lesson of cultural continuity is also a major theme of Margaret Blackman’s life history of Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida woman. This study provides a useful model. Blackman, an anthropologist, interviewed Davidson many times, drawing from her not only recollections of family and tribal history but also a clear sense of the ways that Davidson adapted traditional customs and attitudes to contemporary life. Other anthropologists, working carefully with material gathered early in the century, have begun to tease out a better understanding of women’s lives and of their important roles in their societies.10

One unusual regional source is the writings of Christine Quintasket (Mourning Dove) of the Colville Confederated Tribes of eastern Washington. Generally acknowledged as the first female American Indian novelist, Mourning Dove had a life better documented than most of her contemporaries. Both her life and her writings shed light on the difficulties of Indian life in the early twentieth century. A mixed-race woman who spent much of her life as a migrant worker, Quintasket was grateful for the friendship and literary support provided by Lucullus McWhorter, a serious student of American Indian life. With his help, she published her novel, Cogewea, the Half-Blood, in 1927. But, as was often true in such patronage relationships, McWhorter’s efforts to make Quintasket’s writings acceptable to a white audience partially robbed her of her own voice, and critical opinion of her novel was lukewarm. Today, we recognize her novel (reprinted in 1981), her volume of tribal stories, and her recently discovered autobiography as important sources for understanding the history of Pacific Northwest Indian women. Her writings remind us that many northwestern women have written fictionalized autobiographies. Using their fiction carefully, historians can learn much about the emotional realities of women’s lives.11

The lives of American Indian women who lived on the edges of the Plateau region differed in many respects from those of Plateau women, reminding us that Indian is a designation applied by Euro-Americans to cultures that perceived themselves as very different from one other. The Nez Perce, who lived in what is now Idaho, acquired horses in the 1730s. They quickly developed an obsession with them and an attraction to Plains Indian customs such as buffalo hunting. These changes probably adversely affected Nez Perce women, as they did the women of the Plains tribes. As men began to claim status depending on the number of horses they owned, women’s work came to seem more menial and their personal status lower, for only men owned
horses. Still another pattern is evident in the rich and complex coastal tribes from the Makah and the Quileute-Hoh in the south to the Tlingit in the north. These groups are usually described as warring, trading, captive-taking, slave-owning, hierarchical, and status-proud. As was the case with the Nez Perce, the existence of private wealth may have made coastal women subordinate, but it seems also to have encouraged special roles and skills among them, such as trading.12

Certainly the first Europeans to visit the Pacific Northwest were impressed by coastal Indian women’s prowess as traders. Chinook women traded sea otter furs to the British and American sailors engaged in the China trade that began in the 1780s. Chinook women also traded sex, a relationship that the Europeans viewed as prostitution but that had a different meaning for the Indian women themselves. While the Europeans understood sexual intercourse with native women as an immoral transaction (sex for money or trade goods), the Chinook women, who did not share restrictive European sexual notions, regarded it as simply another kind of barter.13 This is an early example of the misunderstandings that different cultural ideas about gender roles produced.

Still another aspect of cross-cultural gender relationships can be seen in the history of the Hudson’s Bay Company post at Fort Vancouver, center of the land-based Pacific Northwest fur trade. Many of the Indian women associated with Fort Vancouver were traders of furs, sex, or other services.14 Some, such as Margaret McLoughlin, were married to Euro-American men, in Margaret’s case to John McLoughlin, the chief official of the Hudson’s Bay Company for the Columbia District. In western Canada, the original home of the Hudson’s Bay Company, a distinct population, known as the métis (“mixed” in French) emerged as a result of several centuries of sexual encounters between fur-trading Europeans and native women. The history of the métis, and especially métis women, has been studied by Sylvia Van Kirk, Jennifer Brown, and Jacqueline Peterson. Métis women were highly sought as wives by Hudson’s Bay Company officials until 1830, when British settlement (as opposed to trading) was allowed in the Canadian West and white women became available as marriage partners. In the Pacific Northwest, the mixed-race children that Margaret McLoughlin and other women bore were living evidence of intercultural contacts, but the Americans who claimed the region from the British in the 1840s did not acknowledge the métis as a distinct people. Janet Campbell Hale, herself a métis descendant of Margaret and John McLoughlin, recounts in her memoir Bloodlines the pain of this unacknowledged ancestry. In American eyes, she is simply “Indian.”15

Compared to what happened in many other regions of the West, American occupation of the Pacific Northwest occurred with relatively lit-
tle open warfare between Euro-Americans and Indian peoples. But there are other forms of violence that we have failed to fully recognize. Even before they claimed land, Euro-American traders and settlers disrupted native life by drawing Indians into the commercial economy and by spreading disease that devastated indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. Furthermore, recent studies that focus on private lives and the experience of women seem to indicate that domestic violence was a more than occasional aspect of intercultural sexual relationships. Indeed, when viewed from the perspective of Indian women, it appears that the peaceful settlement of the Pacific Northwest by Euro-Americans was as much an act of conquest as open warfare would have been.

Euro-American women played a critical role in the intercultural interactions of the settlement period. The advance wave of settlement included three Euro-American missionary women, Narcissa Whitman, Eliza Spalding, and Mary Richardson Walker, who are among the best-known women in Pacific Northwest history. As Julie Jeffrey so poignantly shows in *Converting the West*, Narcissa Whitman genuinely felt a mission to “civilize” the Indians, but she neither understood nor liked the Cayuse peoples she had come to save. Women missionaries and their successors such as the schoolteachers and field matrons who worked on Indian reservations later in the nineteenth century were employed to work with native women, but, like Whitman, many had great difficulty bridging the cultural gap between themselves and their pupils. Because their purpose was to encourage Indian women to adopt Euro-American gender roles, missionary women and teachers distrusted and disparaged Indian gender relationships. They disapproved of Indian attitudes toward sexuality, they urged the adoption of European styles of clothing, they discouraged native religion, and they wanted to confine American Indian women’s work to domestic tasks. We need to look carefully at both sides of these “civilizing” missions to understand how Pacific Northwest Indian women resisted or adapted to the pressures to change their traditional beliefs and adopt new roles. It is too simplistic to see the white women as naïve, misguided, or evil, although the effects of their efforts may have been all three. Similarly, it is equally simplistic to view Indian women as resistant traditionalists. Rather, they doubtless sought to make their own choices between old and new behaviors and attitudes.

The attraction of paying close attention to these meetings among women of different cultures is precisely that they do not yield simple answers. The places where women of different racial ethnic groups met and disagreed are some of the most fruitful locations for study of cultural differences. As the historian Peggy Pascoe has pointed out, these “cultural crossroads” are the
places where the interconnections (and misunderstandings) among gender, class, and culture are most clear.18

Large-scale American settlement of the Pacific Northwest began in the 1840s. The most celebrated pioneers migrated via the Oregon Trail, and the story of their journeys still holds great popular appeal today. However, as women’s historians have rediscovered many women’s trail diaries, the trail experience that used to be regarded as a dramatic male adventure now has a more somber tone. John Mack Faragher’s *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (1979) was one of the first efforts to study systematically patterns of daily life on the four-to-six-month trip. Faragher gave us a clear sense of the ways in which men’s and women’s work on the overland journey differed and how those differences shaped expectations. While never denying the adventure and excitement of the journey, Faragher found that women’s diaries revealed the reserves of endurance on which overlanders had to draw to counteract the general exhaustion of the long trip. Lillian Schlissel, in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (1971), found that women’s reactions varied by age and maternal status, but generally women were less eager pioneers than men because they more strongly felt (or at least expressed) the pain of parting with their kin who remained behind.19

This gender difference in trail diaries gives us a glimpse of Euro-American gender relationships at an important moment of transition. As Mary Ryan has shown in *The Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981), early-nineteenth-century Americans in the first throes of industrialization were breaking away from extended kin networks and tight-knit communities in favor of more autonomous nuclear families that fostered individualism in their children.20 One of the ways to read the gendered difference in trail diaries is to suggest that men were further along in this transition toward individualism than were women. Men perceived the overland journey as a challenge and adventure, while their wives, still deeply embedded in kin networks, experienced it as painful separation.

Unfortunately, many trail diaries cease at the trail’s end. Even a well-known memoir like *A Pioneer’s Search for an Ideal Home* by Phoebe Judson tells us more about the six months of her trail experience than of the sixty subsequent years she lived in Washington. We need to know more about what women did once they got here, and writers like Shannon Applegate—who wrote *Skookum* (1988), an engaging history of the pioneer Applegate family—are beginning to fill in the blanks. Ironically, one of the most prolific pioneer-era historians was a woman, but although Frances Fuller Victor was an enthusiastic recorder of contemporary events, she seemed to believe that only what men did was important. One of her best-known books, *The River of the
West (1870), glorified the life of the mountain man Joe Meek. Another early writer, Margaret Jewett Bailey, wrote such a candid account of domestic violence within the Oregon missionary community that her lightly fictionalized novel, *The Grains* (1854), was shunned as scandalous. Women’s historians have tended to rely heavily on Abigail Scott Duniway’s autobiography, *Path Breaking* (1914) and Ruth Moynihan’s biography of her, *Rebel for Rights* (1983), for insight into the female pioneer experience. Duniway offered a famous catalog of a farm woman’s work:

To bear two children in two and a half years from my marriage day, to make thousands of pounds of butter every year for market, . . . to sew and cook, and wash and iron; to bake and clean and stew and fry; to be, in short, a general pioneer drudge, with never a penny of my own.22

Duniway’s reference to her economic contribution underlines the immense importance of women’s efforts in the establishment of the region’s
farms. Later generations of farm women continued to perform the same productive activities on the family farm until after World War II. Their activities represent an interesting and still inadequately understood intersection of gender with regional history. The farms themselves—wheat farms in the eastern part of the region, dairy and mixed farming in the west—were commercial farms almost from their beginnings, yet well into the twentieth century farm women performed the same range of activities as had their grandmothers. Long after manufactured products were available, farm women continued their home production of food, clothing, and items for family use. Clearly, on poor and marginal farms, home production by women freed up scarce cash for farm equipment and supplies rather than for family subsistence. But the persistence of women’s domestic work patterns even on wealthier farms suggests that their motivation went beyond economic explanations. Perhaps, just as the women on the Oregon Trail struggled to hold onto kinship networks, Pacific Northwest farm women tried through their own domestic work to demonstrate their commitment to the gender relationships that were a key part of family farm enterprises. In a world where individual wage work has long been the norm, farm women remained committed to a family work ideal.

Aside from her candid description of her life as a farm woman, Abigail Scott Duniway remains a fascinating and controversial regional figure. After they lost their farm in 1862, the Duniways moved to Portland, where she began her own newspaper, The New Northwest, in 1871 and became the Pacific Northwest’s best-known and most persistent advocate for women’s rights. Duniway’s outspoken feminism was unusual in an age when few women freely voiced their opinions. Her campaign for woman suffrage, which she began in 1871 and continued until success in Oregon in 1912, clearly sprang from her personal sense of the discrepancy between women’s essential economic role and their political voicelessness.

In her career as an activist, Duniway experienced a generation gap between members of the pioneer generation like herself and younger, more urban and genteel women who came to the Pacific Northwest in the 1880s, when the transcontinental railroad made travel to the region relatively easy. The attitudes and activities of these post-pioneer women indicated the extent to which the Pacific Northwest was becoming part of the national and international economy. The new urban women were building a middle class and becoming much more like their East Coast counterparts than had been true of Duniway’s contemporaries. The difference that their presence and attitudes made can be traced in G. Thomas Edwards’s Sowing Good Seeds, which examines changing attitudes of regional newspapers toward the veteran suffragist.
Susan B. Anthony when she toured the Pacific Northwest in 1871, 1896, and 1905. Beginning with unbridled hostility toward woman su\-frage and the “unnatural” Anthony in the 1870s, most newspapermen by the turn of the century were resigned (if not reconciled) not only to suffrage but to the notion of women’s participation in public affairs. These changing attitudes reflect a significant shift in gender relationships. The active reform efforts of middle-class women, while falling short of a direct political challenge to men, indicate the development of middle-class gender relationships that made women more confident and assertive in public activities than had been earlier genera-
tions of women. As an essential part of their new understanding of gender roles, many women entered the public arena with reform agendas on behalf of women and children of all economic classes. To these reformers, gender was such a strong tie among women that class (and sometimes even racial) differences paled in comparison.

Beginning in the 1880s, middle-class women in Seattle, Portland, Boise, and many smaller towns formed women’s clubs with serious civic agendas, just like their eastern counterparts. In Seattle Women: A Legacy of Community Development and Washington Women as Path Breakers, the historian Mildred Andrews documents a mind-boggling array of women’s organizations devoted to health care, hospitals, orphan homes, libraries, YWCAs, settlement houses, education, arts, and preservation, in addition to more conventionally “political” crusades for temperance and woman suffrage. Suffrage was successful in Idaho in 1896, probably because of its links with Populism, and was enacted in Washington in 1910 and Oregon in 1912. The reason why suffrage succeeded in the West while failing in the East probably lies with the effectiveness of western women’s organizing. The relative recency of settlement in the Pacific Northwest gave women opportunity for institution-building that eastern women, in longer-established regions, did not have. Club members who began by founding libraries and other uncontroversial institutions often turned to more activist sorts of social reform such as children’s health and moral reforms like campaigns against prostitution and alcohol. These were all gendered issues. Certainly temperance was defined in gendered terms: alcohol posed a threat to the home, for men who drank too much threatened their wives and children with economic ruin as well as domestic abuse. For these reasons, temperance was an issue on which many women (although not Abigail Scott Duniway) agreed.

Indeed, gender solidarity was such a compelling cause in the Pacific Northwest that Oregon led the nation in a key issue in women’s rights. In 1903, the state passed a law that limited the work of women and children in commercial laun-
dry owner, Curt Muller, challenged the law, the case made its way to the Supreme Court, where in a landmark 1908 decision (*Muller vs. Oregon*) the Court decided in favor of Oregon. This gendered ruling, which was specifically argued on the basis of the need to protect the reproductive health of women, formed the basis for protective labor laws, which were pioneering state interventions in private enterprise.28

The strong current of social reform that carried so many middle-class Pacific Northwest women into public affairs peaked in the 1920s. The career of Bertha Knight Landes, briefly mayor of Seattle in that decade (the first woman mayor of a major American city), epitomized the trajectory of the reform impulse. Landes, an active suffragist and social “housekeeper,” was elected mayor in 1926 on a reform platform to clean up bootlegging and prostitution in the city. As Sandra Haarsager showed in her thoughtful biography, Landes’s defeat just two years later had no single cause, but suddenly her linkage of women’s domestic role and social reform seemed out of date. The 1920s roared on, and Landes faded from the political scene. Yet another shift in gender relationships had occurred, causing younger women to scorn their mothers’ reforming zeal.29

The 1920s were also a culmination point for the labor radicalism that had distinguished the Pacific Northwest since the 1890s. Several famous women played parts in this labor militancy. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the famous “Rebel Girl,” was an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW) in the Spokane Free Speech fight of 1909. When she was jailed for her militancy, the Spokane Women’s Club successfully argued that a pregnant woman, regardless of her politics, ought not to be jailed. Flynn, four months pregnant, was released. A few years later, Anna Louise Strong, a Socialist journalist, played a role in fomenting the Seattle General Strike of 1919 by making sure that Seattle workers knew about the triumph of communism in Russia.30 Dana Frank’s impressive study *Purchasing Power* examines the role of women in the decline of militancy in Seattle following the general strike. During the 1920s, Seattle’s labor unions turned away from strikes and workplace confrontations to consumer organizing, emphasizing cooperative buying, boycotts, and union label purchasing. This moved union tactics into women’s terrain, for, as Frank points out, working-class women’s task was consumption: “Women’s assigned job within the working-class family was to stretch the family budget.” What happened in the 1920s, Frank demonstrates, was that male unionists adopted new tactics without adjusting their ideas about gender relations. “Without a willingness to share power with women, without a willingness to ask how women might choose to politicize consumption, and without an equal commitment of women’s concerns at the waged workplace as well, consumer organizing could only partially succeed.”31
Meanwhile, as the economy of the region grew, the population diversified and increasing numbers of women entered the work force. The opportunities they found were very limited. Although in the earliest days of Pacific Northwest settlement there had been greater opportunity for professional women—doctors like Bethinia Owens-Adair in Oregon and lawyers like Ella Knowles in Montana—than on the East Coast, by the turn of the century this western differential had disappeared. Women’s choices were restricted because there were few large cities with diverse industries and because the work forces in large regional occupations like logging, fishing, and mining were male. Women continued to work on family farms, as noted earlier, but in popular stereotype the man was the farmer and the woman the farm wife. Off the farm, wage work for women was largely confined to domestic service and restaurant work or to teaching and nursing.

The topic of women’s work in the Pacific Northwest has yet to be investigated in a systematic way. Our few scraps of information have come largely from oral history interviews. One Euro-American woman recalled that she reluctantly chose nursing because “in reality, I couldn’t even dream of becoming a doctor. The nearest thing I could ever be was a nurse.” An African American woman recalled her mother’s work as a domestic: “She did x and y and all that for 25 cents a day. Can you beat it?” Another woman recalled, “I was in the ninth grade when my mother took me out of school to help her in the restaurant because she couldn’t find a girl that could turn out work like I could. She and I would sit up until 12 o’clock at night picking those chickens and getting them ready.”

These brief oral history excerpts alert us to a significant aspect of women’s labor: as limited as the choices were, there were further restrictions depending on one’s race, ethnicity, and social class. We do not yet fully understand how this sorting process worked. The restriction of African American women to domestic work was a well-known national phenomenon, but we cannot explain the different participation rates of Scandinavian women in domestic service that Janice Reiff found in late-nineteenth-century Seattle: 90 percent of Norwegian women were domestics and 60 percent of Swedish women, compared to 25 percent of the women in other ethnic groups. Another study, of hop picking in the Yakima Valley, showed constant female participation in a rapidly changing work force: within a forty-year period, the pickers changed from Indian families to local Euro-American women and children who were encouraged by the farmers to regard picking as a semiholiday to Mexican migrant families. Furthermore, much of women’s work remained hidden, as this oral history reminds us: “[My mother] did a little dressmaking at home, much against my father’s better
judgement. It was in the days when women weren’t supposed to work outside the home. He felt that he would be embarrassed if she worked for money. He didn’t object to her working but he didn’t like people to know it.” According to a source, these complex labor patterns deserve our careful attention. Drawing on studies of East Coast immigrant women, we infer that the work roles of women of different races and ethnicities were determined partly by their culture’s understanding of gender relationships and partly by the available niches in the Pacific Northwest economy, but we cannot yet say with precision what those were.

Whatever the prewar patterns of women’s work may have been, there is no doubt that World War II was a turning point for the region’s economy and for women personally. Work in shipyards and munitions factories—so much of it that it even pulled Native American women off the reservations where they had been struggling to survive—the migration of African Americans to Seattle and Portland, the efforts of Japanese and Japanese American women to hold their families together under the onslaught of internment, the accelerated push toward farm mechanization caused by the war—all meant changes for the region and its women. Of all of these dramatic changes, the employment of women in the Kaiser shipyards in Portland has drawn the most attention. In the 1970s, the Northwest Women’s Oral History Project conducted many interviews with former shipyard women and distilled the findings in a slide/tape show, “Good Work, Sister!” A few years later, Amy Kesselman, a project member, provided further documentation in Fleeting Opportunities, based in part on the oral histories. Other historians have written on women’s wartime work in Portland and Seattle. Wartime work attracts attention in part because it is so unlike traditional women’s work. The war plants gave women their first chance to prove that they could do “men’s work” at (almost) men’s wages. For the majority of women, when the war ended, their jobs ended. But the effects were long-lasting, for historians believe that the brief wartime accomplishment fueled the substantial and permanent entry of women into the work force that began in the 1950s and continues today.

Following World War II, the Pacific Northwest was changed by the effects of the great dam-building projects of the 1930s and continued migration to the region from other parts of the United States, from Mexico, and from Asia. The irrigated farmlands of central Washington and southern Idaho created by the dams were sites of new community-building beginning in the 1950s by Euro-Americans and Mexicans alike. The cities, Seattle in particular, experienced major suburban growth, while within the city the Japanese community dispersed but the Chinese community was revitalized by the lifting of restrictions on Asian immigration.
The story of women’s activities in the building of these new urban, suburban, and ethnic communities is an important part of post-World War II regional history. There are lessons to be learned from the ways in which ethnic studies scholars have approached community studies. Although some scholars have ignored gender, preferring to concentrate on issues of race and economic class, ethnic studies scholars have always understood the importance of community to everyone, female and male alike. There is valuable information in studies like Quintard Taylor’s *Forging of a Black Community*, Erasmo Gamboa’s *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest* and the essays gathered in *Peoples of Washington*. There are exceptionally valuable community oral history projects, especially Esther Mumford’s on African Americans and Dorothy Cordova’s on Filipinos. Gail Nomura’s beautiful essay “Tsugiki, a Grafting” and her forthcoming study both focus on the Japanese farming community in Yakima. In Oregon, there are similar studies of Portland’s racial and ethnic communities and particularly rich studies of the Japanese in Oregon’s Hood River Valley. Lauren Kessler’s *Stubborn Twig* tells the moving story of three generations of the Matsui family, while Linda Tamura’s collection of oral histories, *The Hood River Issei*, is another rich source. These studies serve as a useful corrective to the strong tendency in all of western history to see only the individual and not the networks of family, work, and ethnicity in which we are all embedded.

There is still another reason to read community studies: they help us avoid the error of treating one particular author as representative of her entire ethnic or racial group. This was the fate of Seattle’s Monica Sone, whose fine autobiography, *Nisei Daughter*, was for a long time the only book by a Japanese woman on Seattle and the wartime internment experience. Now that other books and articles have appeared, we can more fully appreciate the individuality of Sone’s account. Historians have been slow to treat the past fifty years of regional events as history, yet the same processes of migration and community formation go on today as they did a century ago. As is so often the case, regional writers have done more to illuminate the lives of women, and the connections in which they are embedded, than have historians. Contemporary novelists build on a tradition of community-based regional novels, often autobiographical, that was established early in the century and that has been explored in Jean M. Ward and Elaine Maveety’s collection, *Pacific Northwest Women, 1815–1925: Lives, Memories, and Writings* (1995). Perhaps the best-recognized of these early novelists was Carol Ryrie Brink, who in the 1930s wrote several novels...
set in and around Moscow, Idaho, her family home. Marilyn Robinson’s memorable novel about the 1950s, *Housekeeping*, pits Sylvie, a quintessential western adventurer, against the demands of domesticity in a haunting western setting, Lake Pend d’Oreille in northern Idaho. Recently, western women’s writing has enriched our understanding of many different women. To mention but three examples, Mary Clearman Blew’s *All But the Waltz* and *Balsamroot* follow three generations of women as they move from the changing ranch life of Montana to Puget Sound and Lewiston, Idaho. Ursula LeGuin imagines an entire Oregon seacoast community, its women, their families, and their histories, in *Searoad*, while in *Bloodlines* Janet Campbell Hale tells an often-searing family story that links the lives of residents of the early-eighteenth-century Hudson’s Bay post of Fort Vancouver with today’s Coeur d’Alene Indians of northern Idaho. Many other fine writers, poets, and artists are also currently exploring women’s lives.

For all of the previous pages’ insights into the lives of Pacific Northwest women, we are still a long way from a full understanding of regional women’s history. Until we have that history, the knowledge of the Pacific Northwest will remain incomplete. Women’s history has given us the tools to fully map the webs of relationships that have tied the lives of the diverse women of the Pacific Northwest to other lives. Only when we have followed those ties will we be able to write the real, layered, complicated, and densely peopled history of our region.

**Notes**


17. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Converting the West: A Biography of Narcissa Whitman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); see also Clifford Drury, *First White Women Over the Rockies* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1983), 3 vols. Although Drury’s interpretation is dated, his volumes include almost complete texts of diaries kept by these early missionary women.


24. I am indebted to Crystal Cambron, Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Washington State University, for this insight.


34. Oral history from the Washington Women’s Heritage Project collections are located at the libraries of Western Washington University, University of Washington, and Washington State University.


37. Washington Women’s Heritage Project collection.


Black Oral History Project”; Dorothy Cordova, “King County Filipino Oral History Project”; Gail Nomura, “Tsugiki, a Grafting,” in this volume.


