

Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family From Slavery to the Present

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fathers who periodically carried out "purity raids" on the brothels, while simultaneously making money from the illegal business. Although relatively few members of the ranking establishment drew direct revenues from the vice trade, prominent businessmen, office holders, and civic leaders indirectly profited because the prostitutes brought dollars and clients into the broader marketplace. Sizable towns which might have attempted to eliminate these illegal activities certainly would have invited an economic setback from which they may never have recovered.

Both of these studies stand as important additions to frontier and women's history. Perhaps the conclusions seem more of the common-sense variety than of the earth-shaking type, but the corrections of popular stereotypes needed to be made. While Butler assumed the historian's approach and Goldman pursued the discipline of sociology, both authors complemented and reinforced each other's efforts. The "oldest profession" has now been properly moved from the gossip parlor to the dissecting microscope of the social scientist.

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Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present, by Jacqueline Jones. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985. xiii, 432 pp. Notes, illustrations, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$25.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow is a remarkable, elegantly written book, the first to provide a comprehensive survey of the work, family life, and community service activities of black women from the period of antebellum slavery to the present. It is a welcome addition to Afro-American historiography and to the literature in American women's history, with endorsements from black scholars and leaders. The dust jacket quotes Coretta Scott King, for example, who notes that the book provides "a moving, eloquent testament to the strength, dignity and the courageous struggles of black women in America." Not long after publication, it received the 1985 Brown Memorial Publication Prize, presented for the best book on Afro-American women's history by the Association of Black Women Historians. Jacqueline Jones was also the author of *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1973* (1980). A professor of American history from Wellesley, Jones indicated that *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* grew out of courses she taught there on women's history since 1977.

Yet, for interpretation, topical content, methodology, and new insights, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*—which surveys 150 years of black

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women's work, their life-stages, subculture, changing household composition, and an "ethos of mutuality" that distinguished black women's community self-help activities—is a difficult book to review. For documentation and interpretation, it is based almost exclusively on familiar secondary studies and contemporary published sources; so much so, that the substantive information presented and conclusions offered provide little that is new, to the scholar of the Afro-American historical experience. The central theme of the book—the doubly disadvantaged status of black women who have felt the weight of racial discrimination compounded by sexual prejudices in their lives—is one that is also pervasive in Afro-American historiography.

In challenging the recent "consensus" view of American working women's history, Jones indicates the literature's failure to capture the black American woman's work experience, "because it does not consider the significance of slavery as a labor system that exploited women, and because black wives entered the work force in greater numbers, only to face a fundamentally different kind of prejudice, compared to their white counterparts" (6). This theme, too, has been explored in the scholarly literature of the black experience. Jones's contribution, then, is that from these disparate published sources she pulled together a coherent synthesis which details the labor experiences and family life of black women. In doing so, she emphasizes the continuity of their oppression both as workers and as women, from slavery through freedom. She also provides a bridge that brings the labor history of black women into the mainstream of American working class women's history.

The book is divided into eight well-written and well-documented chapters. A portrait of black women at work presented in thirty-one pictures illustrates the historic diversity of their labor. A brief introduction points to the implications of the study within the contexts of Afro-American history and American women's history. An epilogue assesses the economic status of black women in 1984 with implications for their future in the American labor force and for the future of their families in the face of increasing single-parent households. Fully half of the book's content focuses on slave, rural, and working-class women in the South from 1830 to 1915. In the first chapter Jones summarizes recent historical discussions of the expectations imposed on black slave women by their productive-reproductive gender and economic roles. She also emphasizes the tendencies of slaveholders to ignore gender differences in the extraction of arduous physical labor from the slave woman, particularly on small agricultural units where occupational diversity was much greater. Jones also presents prevailing assessments in

Afro-American historiography which document the high esteem in which black women were held in the slave community.

The following four chapters detail the work experiences and family life of two generations of black women after slavery. Jones describes the agricultural labor expectations of black women from 1861 to 1877. Freedom provided only limited opportunities for attempted personal fulfillment. Jones shows that white contempt, viciousness, and violence ultimately relegated black women to the inexorable demands of agricultural field labor. In chapter three Jones discusses how black women attempted to manage their households while balancing their roles as wives and mothers in an increasingly commercial economy, one in which their ultimate survival depended largely on creative subsistence agricultural labor. Urban domestic service work represented a continuation of the mistress-slave relationship for black women. Opportunities in urban industrial employment were limited for black women; those that existed, primarily in the tobacco industry, perpetuated a pattern of industrial slave labor. Even organized labor discouraged the attempts of black women to break into industry. Jones emphasizes the educational parity of black women in early twentieth century cities with that of native white women and second-generation immigrant women. With the exception of white collar opportunities in the urban black ghettos, however, black women were excluded from the clerical and sales work force in which an increasing number of white women found employment.

It is in the final three chapters, which cover the period from the Great Depression to 1980, that one finds the freshest part of Jones's study, particularly for American women's history. Her discussion of black women in the 1930s places the labor activities of blacks within the context of federal action, interracial and black political activism, neighborly cooperation, and personal initiative. Then, in a ten-year review of *Ebony* magazine, 1946–1955, Jones documents how its articles on black women had anticipated the shifting portrayal of American women in the white press. In the 1970s and 1980s the white press began to emphasize the "superwoman" status of American women who successfully managed homes, families, and high-powered careers—the basis of articles on black women in *Ebony* of the postwar decade. Jones also narrates the diverse participation of black women in the civil rights movement and discusses the emergence of black feminism within the context of black power and white feminism. She also details the half-century transformation of black women in the American labor force from the 1930s, a decade in which 90 percent of black women were employed as agricultural workers and domestic servants, to the late 1960s, when black women nationally began to approach

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parity with white women in wages and clerical services. By the 1980s labor market studies showed black women losing those gains because of new technology.

Jones indicated that writing this book was a liberating experience. Certainly her perspectives changed in discussions of the oppression of black women in the nineteenth century from those in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth, Jones attempted to tie the bonds of true womanhood together for black and white women. She noted that the white plantation mistress was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of labor required of her in managing her household and supervising her slaves in their household duties, but added, "nevertheless, the system of bondage ultimately involved the subordination of all women, both black and white" (25). Then, in her discussion of the post-Civil War experiences of black women sharecroppers, Jones explained that "a comparison of the experiences of poor white and black women in the rural South suggests that to a great extent, class and gender conjoined to determine what all sharecroppers' wives did and how they did it" (106). This assessment of unchallenged white male dominance and patriarchal authority is pervasive in the more recent historiography of American women during that period. For the twentieth century Jones's synthesis indicts white women as oppressors of black women, while also conceding that "the sexism encountered by white women during these years differed qualitatively from the racism that black women had endured for centuries" (274). Finally, she announced, "white women had served as the active agents of racist America" (316).

Perhaps the only shortcoming in this monumental study is Jones's failure to discuss free black women in the antebellum urban North and South or black women in northern cities in the late nineteenth century. Had she considered the existing studies which have documented the work and family experiences of black women during that period, she would have been able to show the continuity of the black urban experience. Instead, she concluded that "life in the turn-of-the-century urban South alerted black women and men to the conditions they would eventually encounter in the North" (110). This minor criticism should not detract from the significance of Jones's work. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* is vital reading for all scholars in American history and will stand for some time as the standard reference on the work, family, and community life of black women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

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