

Domesticity all dressed-up: Gender in Antebellum Politics and Culture

Tatiana van Riemsdijk

Volume 42, 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1lt42re02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

van Riemsdijk, T. (1998). Domesticity all dressed-up: Gender in Antebellum Politics and Culture. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 42, 235–242.

Domesticity all dressed-up: Gender in Antebellum Politics and Culture

Tatiana van Riemsdijk

Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1998).

Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press 1997).

FOR SOME TIME NOW, feminist scholars have redefined the boundaries of politics by theorizing carefully about gender ideologies and household structures, cultural politics and official politics of parties, ballot boxes and talkative cravated men in legislatures. Read together, these two new books evaluate a body of printed artifacts including novels, newspapers, and legislative petitions. In this discursive realm of publicity, public criticism, and publishing, mostly from outside the legislative halls, women could engage in certain kinds of antebellum political and cultural debates. By examining such discourse, two well-trodden topics in antebellum scholarship, slavery and domesticity, receive a stylish new look in the hands of Elizabeth Varon, an Historian at Wellesley College, and Lora Romero, an English professor at Stanford.

Topical similarity and a modern feminist perspective link these books. Besides that, Varon and Romero occupy completely different theoretical fields. *We Mean to be Counted* places the public words and actions of a select group of elite Virginia women into a Habermasian public sphere of newspapers, novels, reform work, and partisan politics, departing from earlier southern scholarship in women's history, from what she calls "private sphere" histories of family life, mistresses, slaves, and the rhythm of plantation activity. Varon's is an intellectual history of the participation of witty, well-educated, and seductively opinionated women who were complicit in antebellum southern conservatism. In contrast, Romero's *Homefronts* sifts the ideology of domesticity through the Foucauldian filter of post-structuralism.

Tatiana van Riemsdijk, "Domesticity all dressed-up: Gender in Antebellum Politics and Culture," *Labour/Le Travail*, 42 (Fall 1998), 235-42.

She argues that domesticity had so many meanings or "pluralities" — in middle-class homes, on the frontier and high culture, among social reformers and African-American activists — that there was "a mobility of political meanings produced by the same discourse." (9) Romero places her multivariant interpretation against the binary models of opposition politics, such as feminine resistance/patriarchy and private/public spheres.

Varon's work is both lively and bold. She is forceful about her argument: political conservatism in the South, which shunned feminism and abolitionism, did not equate to women's passivity in the political debates of the day, partisan politics, slavery, and the Confederacy. Varon weaves two important threads of political history together by explaining "a commitment to the traditional gender order, in which women deferred to the leadership of men, with a passion for politics and a desire to be heard." (9) Her book opens with a discussion of benevolent and moral reform, then moves to two centrepiece chapters, one about the American colonization society, and following that, an original interpretation of women's participation in partisan politics labelled "The Ladies are Whigs." The second half of her book analyzes women's literary works for evidence of political expression throughout the late antebellum period, secession crisis, and post-war era.

Varon is zealous in crafting the story of her brigade of informed and politically motivated women. They were everywhere: petitioning for the incorporation of charities, publishing articles, fundraising, and crafting a partisan political identity Varon calls "Whig womanhood." Emerging in the 1840s, Whig womanhood was a particular incarnation of civic duty which "embodied the notion that women could — and should — make vital contributions to party politics by serving as both partisans and mediators in the public sphere." (72) Much of the evidence about Whig women is drawn from politicians' wives. Varon presses her argument further: the Whig party conscripted women into its ideological fabric and campaign strategy. Out of patriotic duty, women taught their youngsters to love the Whig party, thereby upholding health, morality, and virtue of their country. This construction of Whig womanhood, a curious blend of Republican Motherhood and domesticity, is a point with which some social historians may take issue. Varon's strokes are broad and general, and Whig womanhood, in Varon's reading, could apply to both northern and southern women, which poses a question about the distinctiveness of southern society and political culture.

Those in the South-is-unique camp might say that we do not really know much about these Whig women. How many slaves did they own? Which churches did they attend? Who were their husbands, fathers, and brothers? This kind of nitty-gritty social history does matter for intellectual history of this sort. Political historians know very well that partisan political loyalties were often rooted in family experience and the plantation economy. Mary Minor Blackford, for example, could and did write openly about slavery and politics because she was an urban woman and her husband was a newspaper editor. Most of the evidence Varon

marshals for her argument concerns wealthy urban women, a small cut of Virginia's elite women. According to William Shade's *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, only 6 per cent of Virginia's population resided in cities in 1840. This is where Varon finds the richest evidence for whiggish political activism. In her first chapter on female benevolence and moral reform, all the petitions for the incorporation of charities came from Virginia's urban centres. That is because in the countryside, Overseers of the Poor did the job, and women's involvement in Bible societies, Sunday schools, and colonization did not require any legislative help.

In one instance, Varon's evidence falls short of demonstrating her ambitious argument for political participation. Varon likes to see her women in the fray of legislative activity, her high-water mark of political activism. As a result, legislative petitions authored by women are critical pieces of evidence. In the chapter on African colonization, Varon found three legislative petitions authored by women. Close reading of the footnotes indicates that only one of three made it to the state legislature in Richmond. One petition, authored by Mary Minor Blackford, on the "subject of gradual emancipation," is a truly remarkable document, yet Varon does not mention that Blackford never mailed it to the Legislature. On the bottom of the typescript version in the Blackford Family Papers, located in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC, the petition reads "My heart failed in carrying it through." Another petition, crucial to Varon's argument, from Fluvanna county, is not cited from the Legislative files at the Library of Virginia, so we do not know if the legislature received it. Instead, Varon cites the *African Repository*, a colonization newspaper. (194) The third petition, from Augusta county, indeed was signed by 215 women, and appeared in the Legislative files. (50, 195) It is important to note that this document was a rarity among colonization petitions. According to Alison Goodyear Freehling's study, *Drift Towards Dissolution*, Augusta is located in the Shenandoah valley, where slaves made up only 21.4 per cent of the population in 1830. We need to learn a little more about these Augusta women, if they were elites, and why they signed this petition. It would also make sense to compare this petition to those authored by men, which appear in the Legislative files from Tidewater and Piedmont counties — Westmoreland, Fauquier, and Fairfax, (to name a few), areas with significantly higher slave proportions ranging from 43.5 to 48 per cent of total population. Yet, even if women were not as close to the Legislative Assembly as Varon would like, her main point still stands: women who worked and raised funds for local auxiliaries of the colonization society engaged in the debate over slavery in meaningful ways.

There are a few slips in Varon's book which should have been caught by the publisher or manuscript readers. In the opening chapter on women's benevolence and reform work, Varon notes that "during the 1810s and 1820s ... the Commonwealth contained scores of Sunday schools for blacks." (27) She cites secondary works on the subject, as well as two recognizable names in Virginia women's history: Ann R. Page, and Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke. (188) To the contrary,

black Sunday schools were quite rare. In the 1820s, among hundreds of Sunday schools for white children in Virginia, only two black Sunday schools appear in the American Sunday School Union Papers, a source overlooked by Varon. Of course, not all schools joined the Union. Only a precious few collections of Virginia women's papers actually mention black Sunday schools including those of Jane Swann Hunter, Judith Lomax, and the colourful Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee (Mrs. Robert E. Lee). There was good reason why black Sunday schools were so few and barely discussed in the 1820s. Such schools had been illegal since 1819, the beginning of Virginia's Sunday school movement. Instead, Varon writes that "tolerance for such educational efforts came to a tragic end in 1831," (27) with a law prohibiting blacks from assembling for literacy instruction. The Legislative records show that much earlier — in the Spring of 1819 — the door closed on black Sunday schools; according to the *Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia: Being a Collection of all such Acts of the General Assembly Vol 1* {Richmond, 1819} Law C111, Sections 15-16, the State defined "unlawful assembly" as a gathering of slaves "in considerable numbers, at meeting-houses, and places of religious worship, in the night, or at 'at schools for teaching them reading and writing.'" Despite this law, Virginia's religious leaders encouraged slaveholders to continue religious instruction to slaves, noting that well-heeled Virginians answered first to God, not the state assembly.

One last point about precision and use of sources ought to be mentioned. In the chapter on African colonization, a topic that has received a great deal of attention from intellectual historians, Varon takes a close look at women's role in the movement, noting that "the conviction that Africa should be Christianized went hand in hand with the conviction that the institution of slavery was sinful, and should, on moral grounds, be gradually dismantled." (45) However, according to Virginia's most influential religious leaders — Reverend William Meade, and Reverend John Holt Rice — both of whom supported colonization, slavery was not a sin. Their ambivalence about slavery had to do with the vices that the slave system produced in the planter class: luxury, violence, sloth, and pride. Slavery had a harmful impact on planters, especially so if masters and mistresses neglected the souls of those in their care. In the specific examples cited by Varon — Ann R. Page, Mary Lee, and Louisa Cocke - not one of these women actually called slavery a sin. Episcopal minister William Meade, Ann Page's brother, was very careful about making these fine theological distinctions in his published work, *Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia* vol 1. The Presbyterian church, another solid advocate of colonization, also left "the whole subject of slavery to the benign and gradual operation of the Gospel" according to the "Act of the Virginia Synod, Nov. 7th, 1836." The subject of colonization, including the role of women, needs to be located in precise religious contexts, ones rich with ambivalence, and where salvation of black souls overlapped with the topic of emancipation.

Both these books stop short of a full discussion about how spirituality informed women's lives and culture. Varon does acknowledge the role of religion and evangelicalism in antebellum reform activity, but stops short of evaluating the churches' critique of party politics. Romero has a far more clinical secularist rendering of 19th century society and culture, despite significant earlier scholarship which shows how evangelical Christianity informed definitions of domesticity. Collapsing religion into terms like "benevolence" and "moral reform" obscures the role of God's agency, and the imperative of salvation. Close and careful assessment of evangelical religion, and the role of spirituality, is crucial to understanding educated antebellum women and their political opinions. For example, rank-and-file slaveholding Virginian women lived in a rural setting, and attended church regularly. They may have been involved in local charities and church-sanctioned reform. By the 1820s, Virginia's elite denominations — Episcopalians and Presbyterians — had made the decisive turn towards evangelicalism. Women lived and worked within a framework determined by piety and specific ideas of God's duty, creating for themselves an unobtrusive, anonymous, yet activist role. Typically, pious spiritual women like Ann Page or Mary Lee shrank away from the noise and notoriety of party politics, writing articles, or petitioning the state legislature. In the southern paradigm of elite piety, drawing attention to oneself in such ways represented vanity and pride — a short trip to losing one's soul. One could argue that a typical elite Virginian woman in the countryside distanced herself from the stain of politics, especially given the churches' *stinging critique of the emerging second party system.*

Romero's discussion places spirituality on the sidelines, thereby distorting the historical origins and context of American domesticity. Her theoretical model makes it difficult for Romero to define domesticity because of the "elasticity of discursive materials." (7) When pressed, she does draw from Rousseau, Hannah More, and Nancy Cott for ideological sources. Women's role in households, in moral surveillance of family members, in creating a sanctuary of love and comfort apart from the rough-and-tumble marketplace, provided a limited critique of patriarchy, or in Romero's words "a repudiation of the exchange of women within the aristocratic patriarchal system." (20) Historians, however, tend to rely on Catherine Beecher as the most influential proponent and stylist of northern antebellum domesticity. Beecher made a career out of writing treatises and establishing schools for women. She crafted a system which applied women's moral and spiritual leadership to the "arts of household maintenance, child rearing, gardening, cooking, cleaning, [and] doctoring" (Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher, A study in American Domesticity*, 152). Beecher was firmly embedded in a Calvinist spiritual legacy which she inherited from her father, Lyman Beecher, a revivalist preacher from a somewhat offbeat New England Calvinist tradition. In the 1830s, Beecher's domesticity was deeply informed by the necessity and immediacy of

constant spiritual vigilance, and by locating a moral system firmly within households, under women's jurisdiction.

The strength of Romero's argument lies in specific formulations of domesticity — in black nationalism and in Stowe's novels — and how this represents specific sites of resistance or complicity or both. The black nationalist movement, and its architect, David Walker, joined in crucial ways by William Lloyd Garrison, deliberately masculinized leadership and political work. *David Walker's Appeal* recounts an incident where a slave woman resuscitates an overseer, thereby dooming a revolt attempt. (58) Women functioned "as internal dissidents [were] made into exiles." (61) In the early 1830s, Mary Stewart, a free-born black woman, a writer and speaker, made a case for "black nationalist social housekeeping," domestic ideology which "provided a model for writing women into the leadership of national movements." (63) In so doing, Stewart undid the bi-polar model of Garrison and Walker against slaveholders. She both critiqued the explicit sexism within black nationalism while also pushing the envelope by speaking in public, operating outside the geographical sphere of household and family. Despite her public role, she did not preach out-of-house activism to other women. In her speeches to black audiences, she asked black women to take pride in being "keepers at home, not busy bodies, meddlers in other men's matters." (62) Romero raises an interesting point here: the canon of black activism draws heavily from a masculine model which includes dramatic tales of physical resistance. Domesticity provided an entry point for women, like Stewart, to enter this nationalist movement as mothers and as saviours of race.

Romero's interpretation of masculine activism functions well when she recounts the stand-off between Frederick Douglas and his overseer Covey. The autobiographical narrative itself, taken as a whole, also directly appealed to the cherished values of middle-class domesticity. Douglas wrote in this way for good reason; he needed white northern support for the abolitionist cause. Douglas recounted his separation from his mother, and beatings of black women, in order to highlight the pathology of southern slavery on the fabric of black families, and by extension, white families. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, used domesticity in the same way: sentimental sub-plots of violence and separated families pulled the heartstrings of northern sympathizers, a readership firmly grounded in domesticity.

Romero sees Stowe's politics in a much different way, however. Domesticity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* addressed middle-class women's oppression. "By transforming her critique of patriarchy into an analysis of slavery," writes Romero, "Stowe identifies the situation of slaves with that of middle-class women." (70) Most southern historians would raise an eyebrow at this, so Romero crafts a discursive-theoretical argument that temporarily suspends historical context. Using bio-politics, an analysis of medical and political subjectivities, Romero splits certain individuals along the mind-body divide. For example, Stowe suffered from hys-

teria, and one of her novel's characters, Little Eva, fell victim to a consumptive illness. This means that their bodies were "used up," just as their intellectual capacities pressed forward. (79) While one's physical health deteriorated under the patriarchal system, one's "self" remained exterior to it. Stowe's evil slaveholding character, Simon Legree, did "use up, buy more" slave bodies. (80) The "discursive entities" of hysterical women and slave bodies represented powerlessness within the patriarchal regime, while at the same time, the intellectual selves provide "transcendental resistance." (83)

After this moment of high theory, it is perhaps worth returning to the more mundane problem of southern cultural distinctiveness. Both Romero and Varon argue that domesticity had cultural currency in the antebellum North and South. This is a significant departure from the political-economy model posed ten years ago by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her study *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Fox-Genovese argued that domesticity did not apply to South because the existence of slavery made households an important site of economic production and reproduction. Northern middle-class households, in contrast, espoused domesticity, with its canon of separate spheres which ideologically separated the social-spiritual role of housekeeping from its economic significance. Under the rubric of domesticity, the bourgeois home was a place for love, comfort, and consumption, values which deliberately obscured the economic value of housekeeping. The most recent look at domesticity and southern households, Marli Weiner's *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina: 1830-1860*, makes the case for a southern version of domesticity, in which retired and cultivated women filled their homes with moral and spiritual influence, and warded off the stain of feminism and abolitionism. (61-2) Since Romero is more interested in discursive context of domesticity, rather than its physical application in northern and southern households, she does not actually engage in this debate over historical context.

Romero's cultural theory, inspired by Foucault, is too complicated for a fair summary in this essay. In sum, domesticity, created "multiple bases for cultural resistance" in the hands of literary middle-class men, women, and the black nationalist movement. (108) Cultural processes do not fit well into binary constructions of dominance/resistance or active/passive or mainstream/marginal categories. Instead, 19th century power relations had "various deployments" in specific venues of struggle: production of novels, western expansion, black politics, and national housekeeping. (109) If domesticity has such slippery cultural meanings, internal tensions, and malleable moveable applications, the same can be said of patriarchy and class. Yet these terms are not problematized and deconstructed in this way in Romero's book. For example, patriarchy held a different constellation of values in the slaveholding South than in antebellum New England.

Romero's complicated theorizing, tantalizing and original as it may be, is quite technical and difficult to follow. Some scholars thrive on the post-modern ship of

critical theory, with its complicated rigging and fancy terminology. Others get easily discouraged and confused from doxa, radical alterity, bio-power, and multiple meanings (or readings), because such analysis lacks concreteness of historical time and place while working against the grain of synthesis or "making sense" of 19th century actions and ideology. Scholars, especially those in the humanities, should theorize and write in a way that is accessible. This does not mean that complex insights and research should "dumbed-down"; on the contrary, a compelling blend of narrative and carefully structured argument can do justice to sophisticated ideas. Varon knows this well: a good story holds the reader through a paradigm shift, making him or her ready to grapple with a new way to understand old questions of politics, slavery, and the Confederacy.