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We Other Victorians: Domesticity and Modern Professionalism

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Introduction

We Other Victorians

Domesticity and Modern Professionalism

By the end of the nineteenth century, a variety of social commentators agreed that what characterized modern “civilization” was specialization.¹ This agreement depended on assumptions about sexual and racial difference. Members of the professional-managerial class² in particular historicized the rise of occupational specialization by citing the evidence of the “natural” evolution of the sexual division of labor from primitive homogeneity to modern differentiation.³ They defined modernity not only through the divided labor of distinct classes but also through the divided labor of women and men, of domesticity and modern professionalism. At the same time, these professionals posed the undifferentiated work of “primitives” against the highly differentiated work of “moderns.” The untrained, unspecialized homogeneous work of racial others, they argued, was quite distinct from the trained, specialized, heterogeneous work of modern professionals.

Such gendered and racialized progressive narratives about civilization conflate, but also separate, the sexual and occupational divisions of labor.⁴ As a result, women are included in modernity because they engage in differentiated labor—in other words, domesticity. At the same time, women are excluded from modernity along with other “primitives” because domesticity is part of the untrained, undifferentiated labor of the past. The conflation and separation of the sexual and occupational divisions of labor, and the racializing of both, raise a number of questions about the discursive construction of professionalism: What effect did ideas about modern civilization, about sex and race, have on the development of professionalism? How are we to understand the relation between the putatively modern “culture of professionalism” and the putatively primitive “cult of domesticity”? Furthermore, how did the first generations of black and white women professionals negotiate ideas about modern occupational specialization, ideas that depended on women and other “primitives” to prove the high status of specialized, trained labor and yet that placed these “primitives” (in different ways) outside such labor?

Modern Women, Modern Work addresses these questions about the relations between gender, race, and professionalism in the United States in the late nine-

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teenth and early twentieth centuries. It demonstrates the crucial ways in which Victorian domestic discourse structures modern professional culture and more specifically, how black and white women intellectuals helped shape the professions. The book reads fiction, memoirs, newspapers, speeches, popular histories, and academic monographs, showing the ways in which women relied on ideas from “the cult of domesticity” and “the culture of professionalism” to authorize interchangeably their writing and their work.⁵ By exploring women’s use of different kinds of narrative forms to engage in a range of professions, *Modern Women, Modern Work* challenges the histories we tell of modern U.S. literature and professionalism and the assumptions about gender and race that inform them.⁶

Until very recently, our accounts of the culture of professionalism in the United States have tended to ignore both how women helped form the professions and how racialized ideas about the division of labor shaped the ideology of professionalism. One of the central reasons for this neglect is that scholars have adopted a history of modernity from the moderns. They have narrated stories of progressive evolution similar to those that the moderns told. Scholars have argued that domestic discourse emerged in the United States in the 1830s out of the economic and social dislocations of the time and reached its standard and most powerful formulation during the 1850s and 1860s. Its ideology of the separate spheres of the sexes—of the private, moral, transcendent realm of woman and the family posed against the public, immoral, rationalized sphere of man and the market—is seen as expressing the tensions within a rising industrial capitalism and as particularly authorizing women.⁷ By contrast, professional discourse is seen as emerging in the 1870s and reaching its standard formulation at the turn of the century. Professionalism’s ideology of academic training, autonomy, community, and public service is described as developing out of corporate capitalism and as authorizing men.⁸ As a result of this history, we continue to describe Victorian domestic culture, women, and racial “others” as outsiders to modernity. Modernity is thereby implicitly linked to masculinity and whiteness and premodernity to femininity and racial or ethnic otherness.

More recently, however, scholars have begun to revise these periodizations and definitions by scrutinizing the formation of what Raymond Williams calls the “modern absolute,” or modernism’s tendency to erase the historical specificity of its claims.⁹ At the same time, scholars are also questioning what we could call the Victorian absolute or the static and generalized assumptions about the separate spheres of the sexes.¹⁰ Across the disciplines, the particularities of gender, race, and class that constitute modernist and Victorian absolutes are being investigated. Such scholarship has resulted not only in new institutional and disciplinary histories but also in a reevaluation of the central tenets of Victorian and modern discourse and their relation to each other.¹¹ *Modern Women, Modern Work* contributes to the process of analyzing the mod-

ern and Victorian absolutes in the history of U.S. culture. It does so by showing how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century professionalism was shaped by nineteenth-century domestic discourse of the separate spheres of the sexes. Specifically, the book demonstrates how black and white women negotiated the discourses of domesticity and professionalism in their narratives about work to contribute to modern professional culture.

Professional ambivalence provides an entry point for my exploration of modern and Victorian absolutes in U.S. culture. Professional discourse in the modern period was generally celebratory, but alongside its optimism runs a profound anxiety. Two sets of contradictory relations inform professional ambivalence in the period this book studies: first, professionalism's relation to democracy and second, its relation to the market. Professionals argued that their work was democratic and rational rather than aristocratic and irrational. They linked their authority to training rather than inherited status. Their claims to egalitarianism, however, enforced social exclusivity. The ideology of meritocracy—the notion that everyone has an equal chance to succeed through education and training—ostensibly promoted equal opportunity, but through its prohibitive forms of accreditation and refusal to acknowledge the power of institutions, it functioned to rationalize white, male, middle-class authority. Similarly, through disciplinary differentiation, the professions created the organizations and the accrediting methods that enabled them to construct community, but this community was based on the monopolistic policing of knowledge and access to knowledge.¹²

Equally important, professionals wanted to define their work as operating outside the determination of the capitalist market. Professional discourse emerged out of the nineteenth-century “cult of science”¹³ and asserted that through objective analysis the economic and social problems created by laissez-faire capitalism could be solved and society progressively transformed in a rational, equitable, and ordered manner. Professionals depended on the notion that, unlike wage laborers, they were beyond the market, and hence disinterested experts, seeking knowledge for the betterment of society rather than themselves; they insisted that they must therefore be independent of the market, with complete control over their field of expertise. The professions, however, were (and are) dependent on the market; the difference between them and other forms of wage labor is that a large part of what they sell is precisely their claim to be outside the market.¹⁴

Modern Women, Modern Work shows that to resolve these two sets of contradictions—in which claims to democratic accessibility and market transcendence clash with institutionalized realities of elitism and market interestedness—U.S. professionals in the modern period used what they denominated as outmoded domestic ideology. Scholars have argued that professionalism relies heavily on appeals to tradition or the past to authorize its modern authority.¹⁵ I focus specifically on how professionals relied on Victo-

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rian domestic ideology of the past. Such a reliance makes a great deal of sense, for domestic ideology was riven by similar contradictions as those that bedeviled professionalism. In Nancy Cott's classic formulation, domestic discourse was "Janus-faced," at once conventional and radical, both accepting and critical of capitalism and democracy.¹⁶ In contrasting the private sphere of women and the home with the public sphere of men and the market, domesticity recognized "the capacity of modern work to desecrate the human spirit" (67). But in posing the home as the redemptive counterpart to an unstable and fractious democracy and a brutal market capitalism, domesticity functioned within the systems that it decried. It enjoined women to "absorb, palliate, and even to redeem the strain of social and economic transformation" (70), enforcing "secure, primary social classification for a population who refused to admit ascribed statuses" as well as fitting men "to pursue their worldly aims in a regulated way" (98). Domesticity came to be imagined as a full-time occupation for women, comparable in its aim and in its specialized description to the divided work of men, which it implicitly supported. Domestic discourse is, in other words, protoprofessional discourse, not only in its critique of labor specialization and social hierarchies but also in its insistence on them (72–74).¹⁷

Domesticity's contradictions and their structural similarity to those of professionalism enabled modernists, on the one hand, to displace the contradictions within and anxieties about professionalism onto a "premodern" domesticity. Domesticity's bad faith became a way professionals could either evade or reflect critically upon the bad faith that inhered in their own work. On the other hand, domesticity's logic of separate spheres, and its belief in the home's transcendence of the compromised political and economic spheres, could also provide professionals with an idealized model from the past of work that (supposedly) transcended the economic and political situation of the time. This book traces the narrative possibilities and kinds of work that the modernists' opposition of domesticity and professionalism enabled. It demonstrates the various and complex ways in which, because of professionals' ambivalence, domestic ideology ironically came to structure their work. I am particularly interested in the ways women used and criticized the discourse of domesticity in order to shape professional work for themselves. This work reveals women's ambivalence about professionalism that is shared with, yet has different contours than that of, their male counterparts.

As must be evident by now, while *Modern Women, Modern Work* challenges the story of rupture between Victorian and modern culture, it nonetheless relies on the terms and ideas that arise out of that story.¹⁸ Because I focus on the ways the "modern" has been constructed, debated, and struggled over across the disciplines, I do not seek to create new periodizations. June Howard has pointed out that periodization "realizes its power as a practice of interpretation and explanation, not classification."¹⁹ In other words, hard and fast definitions about different eras are easily shown to be inaccurate, but periodization

nonetheless remains effective because it functions in the past and present to provide explanatory models of historical change. This book analyzes the gendered and raced struggles over the powerful tool of modernist periodization and our continuing and unexamined reliance on a dominant account of historical change that emerged from those struggles. We need to think critically about the naturalized tropes of modernism (particularly that of rupture), even as we remain attentive to the important social and cultural shifts articulated and created by modernists through their tropes. I therefore challenge our traditional accounts of modernity through an analysis of the struggles over periodization without creating new classifications or terms.

To illustrate more concretely the powerful uses of modernist periodization that this book specifically explores, I turn briefly to Emile Durkheim's influential *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893, 1902). Described as the first major analysis of professionalization and social order, Durkheim's sociological treatise spells out the complex and ambivalent gender and race politics of the relation between domesticity and professionalism.²⁰ His book demonstrates the optimism as well as the anxieties inhering in modern professionalism and how an "outmoded" domesticity serves as antithesis and model to resolve the contradictions of professionalism. The first chapter of the book most clearly reveals the influence that domestic ideology has on the conceptualization of modern professionalism. Significantly, this chapter serves to explicate not only Durkheim's thesis but also his methodology. In this chapter, he dramatizes the book's argument—that occupational specialization in modern society creates social solidarity rather than conflict—by constructing an analogy between the sexual and occupational divisions of labor.²¹ The sexual division of labor in the modern bourgeois family, Durkheim asserts, provides the most "striking example" of a case comparable to the one he is making for disciplinary differentiation.²² While Herbert Spencer had argued that sexual specialization was the hallmark of modern civilization, Durkheim sees sexual specialization not only as a hallmark of modernity but also as analogous to modern disciplinary differentiation.²³ This analogy, we will see, reveals both Durkheim's ambivalence about professionalism and his reliance on domesticity to resolve that ambivalence.

To Durkheim, the evolution of the sexual division of labor parallels but is not reducible to the occupational division of labor. He begins by citing the then-standard history of the sexual division of labor: "The further we look into the past," he asserts, "the smaller becomes the difference between man and woman" (*DL*, 57). At "the beginning of human evolution" (57), men and women are not very different either physically or in terms of their social and political roles (57–58). As a result, he asserts, "conjugal solidarity . . . [was] itself very weak" (59). By contrast, Durkheim argues, in modern times, not only are women physically weaker than men (57), but also their role is highly differentiated from that of men: "Long ago, woman retired from warfare and

public affairs, and consecrated her entire life to her family . . . Today, among cultivated people, the woman leads a completely different existence from that of the man. One might say that the two great functions of the psychic life are thus dissociated, that one of the sexes takes care of the affective functions and the other of the intellectual functions” (60). In Durkheim’s account, the sexual division of labor results in “Conjugal solidarity . . . [which] makes its action felt at each moment and in all the details of life” (61). Durkheim concedes that while “economic utility” may be a factor in creating this solidarity between men and women, such solidarity “passes far beyond purely economic interests, for it consists in the establishment of a social and moral order *sui generis*. Through it, individuals are linked to one another” (61). The family, Durkheim writes, represents the realm of extraeconomic morality and affect—particularly the “moral” emotion of disinterestedness: “[T]he sexual division of labor is the source of conjugal solidarity, and that is why psychologists have very justly seen in the separation of the sexes an event of tremendous importance in the evolution of the emotions. It has made possible perhaps the strongest of all unselfish inclinations” (56). What is of interest here is not only that Durkheim sees the separate spheres of the sexes as representing evolution from a primitive, homogeneous past to a civilized, specialized present but also, and more crucially, that he relies uncritically on nineteenth-century domestic ideology in order to theorize the progressive effects on society of occupational specialization. Durkheim uses the notion that the sphere of domestic relations passes “far beyond” market determination and interestedness to describe professionalism’s comparable transcendence of the market.

Durkheim’s reliance on domestic ideology to describe modern occupational specialization is particularly striking for the way it helps him articulate the terrain of study unique to professional sociology, its autonomous status, and what authorizes it as a discipline. *The Division of Labor* is not simply an analysis of professionalization but is, like much of Durkheim’s work, a manifesto for the new field of sociology and its importance in effecting social change.²⁴ Durkheim’s text analyzes the significance of the way modern “[o]ccupations are infinitely separated and specialized” (*DL*, 39) so that each discipline has its own “object, method, and thought” (40). The text enacts this idea by theorizing how sociology differentiates itself from other modern disciplines. He argues that the domain of “unselfish inclinations,” of morality and disinterestedness (which, as we have seen, are also the domain of domestic relations), is not only what sociology studies but also what inheres in sociology’s methodology and what it subsequently fosters. Taking on economists who naturalize the division of labor as well as philosophers who moralize over it (44–46),²⁵ Durkheim argues that the sociologist, by contrast, studies as “an objective fact” the “moral value of the division of labor” and comes to “scientific conclusions” (*DL*, 46) that will help society. For Durkheim, the extraeconomic

morality of the family exemplifies, and thereby authorizes, the disciplinary autonomy and disinterestedness of sociology.

While Durkheim uses domestic ideology to illustrate his argument about occupational specialization generally and the independence of sociology specifically, his reliance on domesticity raises two problems of chronology that highlight his ambivalence about modernity, a modernity which his text generally insists upon and embraces. The first seems like a minor issue. Since intellectual work or science is the modern to Durkheim, women's specialization in "affective functions" (60) suggests that their domestic work is anachronistic or premodern. This is, of course, not an unusual way to describe women and domesticity at the turn of the century, and as *Modern Women, Modern Work* demonstrates, such a description can be used to very different intellectual and political ends by men and women alike. The effect of Durkheim's particular version, however, is implicitly to exclude women and other premodern or primitive individuals from modern professionalism. The second chronological problem is linked to the first but presents an active challenge to Durkheim's central thesis that increasing occupational division promotes growing social solidarity. Durkheim concedes that the highest form of sexually differentiated labor occurs only among the "most cultivated people" (61, also 60) and that the uncultivated have not yet reached this advanced stage of evolution. Only a small percentage of the population, in other words, are modern. These two problems of chronology—of women's and the home's primitive status and of uneven evolutionary development in which only cultivated men and women have achieved solidarity—throw into relief the text's larger hesitation over the actually quite detrimental effect that modern occupational specialization is having on society. While two-thirds of *The Division of Labor* works to prove that "organic solidarity" results from occupational specialization, one-third is devoted to abnormal forms of and responses to the occupational division of labor that result not in social solidarity but in conflict and anomie.

In Durkheim's famous preface to the second edition, "Some Notes on Occupational Groups" (1902), he tries to address directly the ambivalence and hesitation evident in his earlier argument about modern work. He does so by rethinking the two problems of chronology that the 1893 text left unresolved and by imagining an institutional force that could bridge the gap between the social solidarity that the division of labor theoretically should produce and the conflict and anomie it has in fact produced. In this characteristically modernist text, the "home" is simply eliminated as a major factor in contemporary society.²⁶ At the same time, however, Durkheim embeds the home's extraeconomic significance even more firmly into his conception of the modern in order to imagine a solution to the social problems that occupational specialization has created. In this preface, Durkheim focuses on the chaos and alienation of modern life, "the state of juridical and moral anomie in which economic life actu-

ally is found" (*DL*, 1–2). The "anarchy" of contemporary society, he argues, "is an unhealthy phenomenon, since it runs counter to the aim of society, which is to suppress, or at least to moderate, war among men" (3). It is evident, Durkheim says, that "a multitude of individuals" spend their lives "almost entirely in the industrial and commercial world . . . [and] that world is only feebly ruled by morality" (4). The sociologist's new question therefore must be, "If in the task that occupies almost all our time we follow no other rule than that of our well-understood interest, how can we learn to depend upon disinterestedness, on self-forgetfulness, on sacrifice?" (4). Durkheim's answer to this question of market and personal interestedness is that the "ancient" (7) "corporation or occupational group" (5) (in other words guilds or trade unions) can be adapted to become an effective tool in modern society (7–8, 18). It will be "indispensable . . . not because of the economic services it can render, but because of the moral influence it can have" (10). In other words, the "occupational group" will create the extraeconomic morality that is crucial to social solidarity and that in the 1893 edition he described as being fostered by the "home," or family.

While Durkheim remains interested in his 1902 preface in what he describes as the family's historic role in creating morality (12–18), the point here is that the home, imagined by domestic ideology as a social formation working outside market determination, is dead. Instead, Durkheim argues, the market permeates every level of society. Hence the occupational group or corporation must take on the family's role in creating "moral influence" and "moral power" (10). Despite this account of the market's ubiquity, Durkheim returns anxiously and nostalgically to the family as imagined in domestic ideology to theorize how this occupational group might work: [T]he family, in losing the unity and indivisibility of former times, has lost with one stroke a great part of its efficacy. As it is today broken up with each generation, man passes a notable part of his existence far from all domestic influence. The corporation has none of these disturbances; it is as continuous as life. The inferiority it presents, in comparison with the family, has its compensation (16–17). Because "domestic influence" plays a very small role in modern social life, extraeconomic factors have been marginalized. There is "compensation" possible in a re-creation of the occupational group of the past, but even in the resuscitation of this institution, a superseded domesticity remains the ideal form in which morality can be created. Domesticity is a model, in other words, for modern professionalism, a professionalism Durkheim has posed in both the 1893 and the 1902 texts (albeit in a different manner) as domesticity's analytic and temporal opposite.

Modern Women, Modern Work shows that the paradoxes evident in Durkheim's argument recur throughout professional discourse in a variety of ways. The belief that professionalism represents civilization, combined with the worry that it is breaking down social order; the contrasting of the domestic with the

professional, but also the reliance on the “primitive” domestic as a model to delineate professional transcendence of the market—these are the paradoxes at the heart of this book. Why does Durkheim’s notion of professionalism oppose itself to, rely on, and embed within itself premodern domestic ideology? How are we to understand the manner in which domesticity serves to help Durkheim imagine and illustrate the functions and status of the discipline of sociology, even as it also works to exclude women and “primitive” others from that discipline? How are we to read the relation of Victorian domesticity, imagined as feminine and premodern, to the construction of professionalism, imagined as masculine and modern? What is the significance, in other words, of the engendered and racialized histories of modern progressive professionalism? And, equally important, how might these paradoxes have been used or even reshaped by those positioned as primitives in modernity, as outsiders to professionalism? How did women and racial others engage the paradoxes of professional discourse?

Durkheim’s text demonstrates clearly that we need to think about the break as well as the continuity between Victorian domestic and modern professional culture. The ways in which modern texts compulsively oppose the domestic to the professional, the feminine to the masculine, the primitive past to the civilized present have been crucial in shaping modern ideas about work, as evident in the split between fields and disciplines designated as women’s (teaching, nursing, social work) and those customarily viewed as the province of men (science, medicine, law), as evident more broadly in the struggles by women and racial and ethnic minorities to gain entrance into the professions and their relative exclusion from them. At the same time, when we focus only on these oppositions, we ignore the important historical and ideological overlap between the domestic and “primitive” and the professional. In particular, we ignore the relays between engendered and raced forms of work, relays that elaborate precisely the anxieties that the oppositions seek to elide, allay, or contain.²⁷

If the paradoxes we see in Durkheim’s *The Division of Labor* suggest that we need to read the relation between modern professional and Victorian domestic culture against the grain of the “modern absolute,” that book’s ambivalence and hesitation also suggest that we need to read against the grain of what we could call the Victorian absolute, the static and universalistic assumptions about the separate spheres of the sexes. To reevaluate the Victorian absolute, *Modern Women, Modern Work* focuses on how women fiction writers—as well as activists, academics, and professionals—combined the discourses of domesticity and professionalism in their vocations to shape and reform their work and society. Such a focus on women’s texts is not meant to imply that women alone combined these discourses. Nonetheless, the scholarly neglect of both women’s participation in the formation of the professions and the importance of “feminized” discourse to that formation demonstrates how the opposition between

Victorian and modern culture structures modern thinking; neglect registers how the (often effective) attempts by the moderns to exclude or limit women's participation in the professions make us read women as "out of it," as outside the culture of professionalism.²⁸

There is, however, another more complicated and equally significant reason for our failure to read women's involvement in professionalism, namely the continuing ambivalence that feminist scholars themselves feel about professionalism.²⁹ Professionalism, as I have already argued, has elicited mixed feelings from professionals and nonprofessionals alike. While entry into the professions was one goal of the women's movement, it was a contested goal with contested effects. Many feminist scholars have shown not only that professionalism ended up containing much of the radicalism of the women's movement (as is evident in the term *women's professions*) but also that it was often achieved at the expense of working-class and minority men and women.³⁰ Professionalism uncomfortably highlights not only fractures within women's fight for equality but also how women's history is imbricated in the dominant ideologies and institutions of U.S. capitalism. Calling the Victorian absolute into question, therefore, entails exploring the inequities that women professionals enforced, even as they criticized and battled other inequities. An important example will suffice to demonstrate this point.

In her feminist manifesto, *Women and Economics* (1898), Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman argues that society can progress only if woman's economic dependence on man ends and woman is trained to engage in specialized or professional labor. One of Gilman's most popular books,³¹ *Women and Economics*, follows the basic outlines of the Durkheimian narrative, defining modernity as specialized labor that promotes collective and progressive, rather than individualist and hence destructive, aims. Gilman writes, "To specialize any form of labor is a step up: to organize it is another step. Specialization and organization are the basis of human progress, the organic methods of social life."³² Gilman, however, uses this standard progressive narrative about labor specialization to different ends than Durkheim. In keeping with this argument, Gilman associates modernity with professional work and social solidarity but argues that for full modernization to be achieved, women cannot be relegated to domesticity. Highlighting rather than evading the way modern professionalism imagines women and their domestic labor as anachronistic, Gilman writes that society's progress has been stymied by the fact that specialization and organization "have been forbidden to women almost absolutely" (*WAE*, 67). Because woman's economic activity is "of the earliest and most primitive kind" (8), she "hinders and perverts the economic development of the world" (121). Once woman is trained to do specialized labor for the common good, Gilman asserts, social evolution will proceed apace. Women's recent demand for economic independence and the rise of women's organizations therefore reveal, says Gilman, "one of the most important sociological phenomena of the cen-

tury,—indeed, of all centuries,” namely “the first timid steps toward social organization of these so long unsocialized members of our race” (164).

This triumphal evolutionary narrative insists on the link made by the professional-managerial class between specialized labor and progress, but Gilman claims that narrative for women as well as men. Even as she naturalizes occupational specialization, she nonetheless denaturalizes the usual association, one that Durkheim exemplifies for us, between the specialized division of labor and the sexual division of labor. This denaturalization involves two moves. First, Gilman criticizes the natural as representing the uncivilized and unevolved. Nature represents not just primitive homogeneity but also individualistic competition and conflict. It is coterminous, therefore, with the inefficient, immoral workings of laissez-faire capitalism. For example, sex selection (the choosing of mates) is indeed natural, but that means it is guided by the same uncivilized logic as that of the market. “Natural” sex selection is therefore the same as prostitution: women must sell themselves to men, while men must sell their labor to the highest bidder to acquire goods to buy women (105–14). Writes Gilman, “The sexuo-economic relation in its effect on the constitution of the individual keeps alive in us the instincts of savage individualism which we should otherwise have well outgrown” (121). As a result, neither men nor women can work “disinterestedly for the social good” but instead must act “in their own immediate interests” (114). This critique of the “natural” market is indebted not only to a progressive belief in modern civilization but also to a domestic belief in the possibility and superiority of domains outside the market.³³ Gilman repeatedly compares the inefficiency and immorality of nature to the work of the trained professional who transcends the natural (*WAE*, 169–99, 225–47). For Gilman, natural sex selection must be eliminated in order for men and women to pursue the highest ideals, ideals she describes—through a domestic critique of the market and a domestic belief in transcendence of that market—as professional and scientific ones that function outside market determination (113–14, 230–47).

If Gilman’s first move in denaturalizing the sexual division of labor is to appeal to domestic ideology’s notion of realms of labor outside the market, her second and related move is to do so by enforcing a virulent naturalized racism. Gilman’s feminist thought, as Gail Bederman has shown, is “at its very base racist.” Thoroughly imbued in the discourse of civilization of the late nineteenth century, Gilman as early as 1890 was arguing that “race function does not interfere with sex function.”³⁴ In other words, natural or essential, differences are racial, not sexual. At the end of her book, she drives home this point in a dramatic fashion by comparing the contemporary marriages of savage domestic women and educated professional men to scandalous cross-evolutionary, cross-racial pairings. Writes Gilman: “Marry a civilized man to a primitive savage, and their child will naturally have a dual nature. Marry an Anglo-Saxon to an African or Oriental, and their child has a dual nature.

Marry any man of a highly developed nation, full of the specialized activities of his race and their accompanying moral qualities, to the carefully preserved, rudimentary female creature . . . and you have as result what we all know so well,—the human soul in its pitiful, well-meaning efforts, its cross-eyed, purblind errors, its baby fits of passion” (*WAE*, 332). Gilman threatens her audience with evolutionary stasis, even devolution, if they do not allow white women to enter the professions. Modernity, she argues, is white racial progress. It is racial others, not white women, who are and must be excluded from modernity and the modern professions.

Women and Economics suggests that we need to be attentive to the nuances of what Alice Gambrell calls women’s “insider-outsider” status in modern professionalism, an insider-outsider status that functions differently according to class, ethnic, and racial variables.³⁵ We cannot simply assume that any group of women was “out of it,” separated in their professionalism from the ideas that were formative to professionalism more generally. In Gilman’s case, for example, the benefits that accrue to her feminist argument for denaturalizing the sexual division of labor cannot be extricated from the historically specific, naturalized racism on which they depend. But while women’s professionalism highlights feminism’s participation in the culture it criticizes, it is, after all, through that culture, through the struggles over power within that culture, that change takes place. While Gilman’s racist, feminist revision of the basic progressive narrative of professionalism was influential, it was not by any means the only narrative of women’s professionalism. Middle-class, African American women also laid claim to professionalism and contested both the engendered and racialized periodizations of mainstream professionalism in their constructions of their expertise.³⁶ We see such contestations in (among other important examples) Ida B. Wells’s careful depiction of herself in her 1890s antilynching journalism as a lady accepted into the highest and most cultivated echelons of British society, a depiction intended to counter representations of black women as primitive, sexually promiscuous savages; in the brief, pointed histories by Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, Sarah J. Early, and Hallie Q. Brown of black women’s educated and organized professional activism, histories that directly protest black women’s exclusion from the Ladies Board of Managers at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893; in Mrs. N. F. Mossell’s comprehensive list in *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894, 1908) of every black woman professional in the U.S. whom her research has discovered, a list that directly contests Annie Nathan Meyer’s all-white account of women’s professionalism in *Woman’s Work in America* (1891).³⁷ Middle-class, African American women, like their white counterparts, negotiated the complex relation between ideas about the sexual and occupational divisions of labor, about the past and the present, in a broad range of ways that have not been fully charted.

I argue throughout *Modern Women, Modern Work* that as feminist scholars we

must historicize our own claims to expertise, making distinctions between better and worse forms of professionalism and better and worse ways of authorizing analysis, critique, and reform.³⁸ Our professional work and our critiques depend historically on how professionalism was negotiated and criticized by our predecessors. We cannot simply escape the past or the present of women's vexed relation to the professions. Bruce Robbins has made this point about professionalism more generally. Analyzing the contemporary attack on academic professionals' interestedness, an attack launched ironically enough by both the right and the left, Robbins writes, "[W]e have to stop positing spaces of freedom which, like domesticity . . . inevitably mask someone's servitude. . . . Not disembodied freedom, but diverse embodiedness and incomplete servitude have to become the common sense view of intellectual work" (*SI*, 10). Robbins's use of an analogy to domesticity underlines how domesticity continues to function as both antithesis to and model for professionalism. As antithesis, domesticity designates women's role as the primitive in the modern sexual division of labor. As model, domesticity describes an imagined realm of unalienated and transcendent labor. Robbins insists, however, that a normative and idealized account of domesticity is analogous to a normative and idealized version of professionalism. Such a reading of domesticity—which erases both the working-class domestic's poorly paid productive labor outside the home, and the bourgeois and working-class woman's unpaid, productive labor in the home—is comparable, Robbins argues, to the version of professionalism that erases its relation to the market. As feminists, we could add that to insist that women's professionalism must be transcendent is to disable us from seeing the differences between how women relied on and criticized normative and idealized accounts of domesticity to authorize their professionalism *and* to what very different ends they did so. Discourses create reverse discourses—across as well as within different social groups—but we need to refuse the temptation of imagining that these reverse discourses are transcendent.³⁹ *Modern Women, Modern Work*, therefore, highlights the diverse embodiedness and incomplete servitude of women's professionalism by exploring discourses and reverse discourses within women's ideas about professionalism, particularly across and between black and white women, who have historically been situated in very different ways in U.S. society and culture.

Modern Women, Modern Work focuses on the years between the turn of the century and the 1940s in the U.S. These are crucial years for U.S. professionals, years in which they are struggling to solidify their self-definition as democratic and disinterested experts. These definitions are being challenged, on the one hand, by the pressures of what has been called the corporate and consumer capitalism of the U.S. that disproves the ideology of meritocracy and autonomy,⁴⁰ and on the other hand, by women and minorities, who are using such definitions to enter the professions. To tell the story of these complicated strug-

gles within and over professionalism, the book relies on a methodology at once historicist, comparatist, and feminist. Each chapter of the book pairs selected fictional texts with contemporaneous, nonfictional writings in other professional fields. Such an approach allows for an examination of moments within the history of disciplines when the opposition between the domestic and the professional was deployed in a productive and characteristic way to shift debates about society and women's role in it. The book insists that, as Joan Scott puts it, "Changes in the organization of social relationships always correspond to changes in representations of power, but the direction of change is not necessarily one way."⁴¹ Each chapter therefore begins with a localized problem about representation (in, for example, the narrative forms of regionalism, sentimentalism, naturalism, and modernist experimentation). I show how this local problem opens up a nexus of social and political debates surrounding the engendering and racializing of modern expertise in corporate and consumer capitalism and how women intellectuals negotiated those debates. My focus is on professions in which black and white women gained noteworthy (if not always permanent) access: literature, social work, political activism, journalism, anthropology. These professions would not all be included in classic studies of the history of the professions, and that is part of the impetus for studying them.⁴²

In recent years, new historicism has been associated with the kind of work that, like mine, redefines "the boundaries" of the archive by focusing on discourse across the disciplines.⁴³ By rethinking what is background and foreground material in different disciplines, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt explain, new historicist work seeks to interrupt the "Big Stories" and the "epochal truths."⁴⁴ The use of the "anecdote," Gallagher and Greenblatt further argue, has been particularly helpful in challenging traditional narratives of change and continuity.⁴⁵ While similar counterhistorical impulses to the ones Gallagher and Greenblatt describe shape this book, I am not convinced that the anecdote is a satisfying formal analogue to those impulses. The anecdote, it seems to me, does not sufficiently trouble the relation between background and foreground. Instead, I would argue that epochal truths can be more thoroughly reexamined through an extensive investigation and comparison of archives seen as anecdotal to different disciplines. Juxtaposing texts across disciplinary lines, and engaging in equivalent explorations of them and the institutional frameworks in which they operate, can better demonstrate the pervasiveness and varied effectiveness of certain discourses than the anecdote. While problems and paradoxes of representation in literary texts are the site on which my analyses begin, that site opens up comparable issues in other disciplines. *Modern Women, Modern Work* therefore analyzes common tensions—between transcendence and situatedness, abstraction and specificity, objectivity and subjectivity, and exclusiveness and inclusiveness—across the disciplines in

this time period and the ways in which women used domestic and professional discourses to address those tensions.

It is also true, however, that crossing disciplinary boundaries need not necessarily interrupt the “Big Stories” we have told about modernity, a point I discuss in Chapter 3 in relation to certain versions of new historicism. For that reason, this book is more deeply indebted to the ethics and polemics of contemporary feminist thought than to the counterhistorical impulses of new historicism. Specifically, it depends on what Carla Kaplan describes as feminism’s historic “privileg[ing]” of “conversational themes and dialogic methods” and feminism’s self-critique of the profound misunderstandings, appropriations, and conflicts that have ensued from essentialist assumptions about that dialogue.⁴⁶ Adapting Kaplan’s notion of a feminist “erotics of talk”⁴⁷ (which Kaplan adapts from Audre Lorde), I examine, on the one hand, moments of dialogic identification between women, where certain kinds of intellectual and political struggles about professional work were conceptualized across women’s texts in common ways. On the other hand, I also explore the power dynamics that preclude identification between women and how disidentification enables important forms of social critique.⁴⁸ I focus thus on the ways white women have attempted to shut African American women out of the conversation about, and practices of, professionalism and the ways, in turn, that African American women have contested those attempts and reshaped the dialogue. I also explore (though less fully than the first conversation between women) the complex dialogue between progressive men and women about women’s professionalism.⁴⁹ A feminist polemic about both the possibilities of, and problems with, the dialogue between women, and between men and women—between social groups situated historically in different ways—guides the principle of selection of thinkers and texts in *Modern Women, Modern Work*.

I need to make one final and important point about methodology. While I do not shy away in this book from the power differentials that have led to conflict as well as cohesion in the dialogue between women and between men and women, I do not explore all those differentials. Most obviously, my focus on professionalism tends to subordinate analyses of class conflict to those of race and gender. Nonetheless, my hope is that a historicist and comparative analysis—sharpened by a feminist focus on the power dynamics in the dialogue between black and white women, and between men and women—outlines a different history of modernity, one that will continue to be filled in by scholars in the years ahead. More crucially, and a point that bears repeating, I hope that my analysis will help us to think through and shape better models of feminist professionalism in the present.

The first two chapters of the book explore how black and white women in the U.S. used domesticity and professionalism to create new kinds of socially activist work for themselves. In Chapter 1, I compare the critical use of nos-

talgia for a rural, domestic past in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) by Sarah Orne Jewett with that in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) by Jane Addams. I argue that educated women at the turn of the century combined Victorian ideas about middle-class domesticity with newer ideas about women's leisured cultivation to depict women as better than men at mediating social conflict. This creation of a feminized transcendent expertise, while crucial to the foundation of professional social work, provided white women with a powerful version of authority but denied it to women from putatively primitive or hybrid cultures.

Chapter 2 continues to explore how women used domesticity and professionalism to authorize and shape their work. Here, however, I focus on women who were excluded from the kind of expertise created by Addams and Jewett. Both the novelist Pauline Hopkins in *Contending Forces* (1900) and the club organizer Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin in her newspaper, *Woman's Era* (1894–95) contest the claims to transcendence of domesticity and cultivation. Adapting the narrative form of regionalism, they rethink the region-nation and private-public divides and argue for a new kind of professional expertise that is situated rather than abstracted. The chapter demonstrates the close connection between black women's narrative forms and their organized, political activism, an activism which complicates the transcendent expertise that Jewett and Addams created and that the culture of professionalism more generally promoted.

While the first two chapters show how women were able to deploy domestic and professional discourse productively, the third and fourth explore the ways some important thinkers attempted to stabilize the opposition between domesticity and professionalism through a contrast made between (domestic) subjectivity and (scientific) objectivity. Chapter 3 demonstrates that this contrast was used to curtail the supposed feminization of cultural authority. The novelist Frank Norris in *The Octopus* (1901) and the philosopher George Santayana in "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (1911) criticize Victorian, sentimental aesthetics and women's central role in producing them, arguing that such aesthetics disguise and support the functioning of capitalism. Their analysis—posed as masculine, professional, and objective—paradoxically returns them to a notion of transcendent aesthetics inherited from feminized sentimentalism, an aesthetics that became central to the creation of modern literary expertise. Norris and Santayana's depiction of women and their cultural power illustrates perfectly the influence that domestic discourse had on standard forms of modern professional discourse, how modernists tried to erase that influence, and how that influence has been ignored by subsequent readers. Norris and Santayana's thinking represents the powerful and resilient narrative of modernity and its complicated progressive antifeminism that I call into question throughout this book.

It was not simply men, however, who sought to stabilize the opposition be-

tween domesticity and professionalism. Chapter 4 explores how Willa Cather and Ida Tarbell also attempted to do so in order to insist on their professional authority. Relying on notions of the journalist's independence from the market, Cather and Tarbell contrasted their work to the "interested," best-selling women's writing of the past. Their journalistic belief in the modern writer's autonomy, however, functioned to highlight not so much the truth of their work as the truthfulness of their individual character. Cather and Tarbell's professionalism was, in short, a contradictory notion, pointing both to and away from the author's involvement in the text, both to and away from a critique of the market, as Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) and Tarbell's *The History of Standard Oil* (1904) show. These women's claims to professional authority are undermined by their own construction of their expertise, demonstrating how professionalism for women could as much reinforce the status quo as undermine it.

Chapter 5 provides a coda to the book as a whole. It does so by comparing the manner in which two women anthropologists combined domestic and professional discourse to shape new kinds of authority for themselves, as well as the different ways that authority was understood, and the conflicts between them over their authority. Specifically, it focuses on how Zora Neale Hurston in *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) and Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* (1934) linked and criticized both Victorian domesticity and modern professionalism through their analysis of the problematic nature of any claim to transcendent authority, whether subjective or objective. The chapter investigates how Hurston and Benedict productively combined and interrogated domestic and professional discourse in order to engage in broad forms of social and disciplinary critique. At the same time, however, the chapter shows that while these women's writings enabled them to become public intellectuals, it was difficult to maintain a balance between using the binary of domesticity and professionalism and simply enforcing that divide. This is evident in the quite different reception of their work, their complex personal and professional relationship, and the changes their work registers over time.

Modern Women, Modern Work revises our literary histories as well as our theories of professionalism. It calls into question the assumptions about gender and race that animate the opposition between Victorian domestic and modern professional culture on which modernists relied. It argues not only for the importance of what we could call the Victorian others of modern culture but also, following Michel Foucault, for the historical indebtedness of our modern ideas about the professions and disciplines to Victorian culture more broadly.⁵⁰ In focusing on the relation between ideas and institutional change, the book demonstrates how women's narratives helped to shape modern professionalism in the U.S. These narratives, however, did not always work to make professionalism either more inclusive or democratic. In mapping out the constraints that women in particular faced as they shaped their writings and their work, in

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tracing the slippery compromises they embraced and the brilliant adaptations they made, *Modern Women, Modern Work* problematizes the naturalized histories we have told about modern professionalism and helps us to rethink our own work within the culture of professionalism.