

Please Pardon the Mess While We Reconstruct Sisterhood: Some Thoughts on Research in the History of Women's Sport and Leisure

Catriona M. Parratt and Rita M. Liberti
University of Iowa, IA

In a 1985 article, Nancy Hewitt argues that the notion of a universal sisterhood among women in 19th and 20th century America has little if any validity. She asserts that, despite the reality of conflict and tension among women of different social classes and races, women's historians have continued to employ a rhetoric of community which, while it has been valuable in demonstrating women's historical agency, has also obscured important social and material inequalities and differences among them. In order to illuminate the historical experiences of all women, Hewitt insists that historians must examine material conditions and circumstances, as well as ideological constructs such as 'universal sisterhood' and 'the cult of true womanhood.' Furthermore, she argues that scholars must acknowledge that diversity, discontinuity, and conflict were also part of women's historical experiences and agency.

Recent scholarship in the history of women's sport and leisure supports Hewitt's position. Susan Cahn, Cindy Himes, Kathy Peiss, Jan Todd, and Linda Williams have all shown that class and race were important factors in shaping the kind of sport and leisure that women enjoyed, and the way in which their recreation was viewed by society. What this work indicates is that the gender ideologies of white,

upper- and middle-class culture did not constrain working-class and African-American women to the same extent and that for different groups of women, styles of play, attitudes towards competition, and administrative policies were fundamentally influenced by class and race based ideals and images of womanhood.

Challenging the notion of a common experience and universal sisterhood undoubtedly enriches our understanding of the complexity of women's sport and leisure, and the cultural and material forces which shape them. But care must be taken that in dismantling one monolith we do not construct others, for just as the idea of common bonds and experiences uniting all women is limiting, so too is the notion of common bonds and experiences uniting all women of a particular social class or racial or ethnic group.

This paper examines some of the diversities and conflicts among African-American women in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, and among working-class women in turn-of-the-century England, and discuss their significance for those women's experiences of sport and leisure. Exploring these issues leads us to reconsider the notion of sisterhood with which we started, and to a discussion of the possibility of re-constructing the concept in such a way as to acknowledge both diversity and commonality, division and unity. This discussion is framed largely as a rehearsal of the debate on the challenges and possibilities of the 'new cultural history' and especially post-structuralism.