

Kara Dixon Vuic. *The Girl Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Line*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2019. Pp.392. ISBN: 978-0674986381

Kara Dixon Vuic's book, *The Girl Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Line*, is an ambitious study of the women who were used in an attempt to domesticate the United States military in foreign conflicts throughout the twentieth century. These civilian women were symbols of home, reminders of the mothers, sisters, lovers, and daughters left behind. They were expected to "construct wartime gender roles, maintain an effective fighting force, mobilize home front support, render the military and its work palatable to the American public and manage the American military presence in foreign countries" while maintaining ideals of femininity, respectability, and service (3). And yet, these women used their service to forge their own ideas of their work and worth.

Vuic argues that civilian women in World War I were used to bring home to the front by embodying traditional ideas of womanhood in a combat zone, reframing traditional domestic duties in terms of patriotism and transferring traditional women's work to the public sphere abroad. Both civilian organizations such as the United Service Organizations (USO) or Red Cross and the military institution expected women workers to be "an antidote to the otherwise all-male environment" by exuding "a femininity that brightened the gloom of war and softened its brutality" while simultaneously reinforcing "conventional divisions of men's and women's wartime roles" (27). They were to simultaneously be symbols of maternal love and

heterosexual desire. And yet, women framed their service in much larger terms- symbolic of changing ideas of gender and service. Vuic traces this theme throughout the book: the ways in which women understood their work as a part of women's ever-expanding roles in American society, even as they were sent back to the home front after every conflict.

At the start of World War II, women were called to service once again, to represent idealized versions of home and reinforce ideas of American womanhood, and yet their roles changed dramatically. Vuic argues that while Red Cross and USO women's roles "reinscribed conventional notions of women's wartime roles," the women themselves challenged these boundaries, thus "embodying the fluctuating gender ideologies of the era" (61-62). Meanwhile, the military and the civilian organizations expected recreation and entertainment workers to precariously balance ideas of respectable femininity and professionalism with some form of wholesome sexuality that reinforced heterosexuality and martial masculinity.

In many ways, Vuic's book is a study of both changing and stable ideas of female respectability and what that meant to the civilian women who served the men on the front line. From carefully chosen clothing to fraternization, women were expected to balance professionalism with romance and sexuality. The military itself, Vuic argues, "couched the women's work in a language of respectability," but expected women to walk a careful tightrope between "sexual desire and familial love" (5-6). While ideas

concerning how much sexuality was respectable changed throughout the twentieth century, the expectations on women to embody these ideas of respectability did not change. These ideas of respectability were more apparent in the experiences of African-American women than anywhere else.

Vuic's strongest argument concerning the intersections between race and femininity are strongest in her discussion on the end of the Second World War. In analyzing the experience of black women in the USO and Red Cross, she speaks on the ways that discussions of their service emphasized patriotism and respectable womanhood, as the women themselves attempted to navigate "organizations that officially espoused but did not enforce racial equality along with a military that insisted on racial separation, especially in matters of sexuality" (103). This was made all the more difficult by women's service in non-Western theaters, concerns which were raised once again during the Korean War, where women were "caught between their own ideas about race and foreign occupation zones" (141).

The Cold War brought a return of World War I era understandings of women as "essential for steering men toward a wholesome lifestyle that, in the nuclear age, modeled Cold War preoccupations with the home, family, and sexuality," in ways that reflected domestic fears of political and social turmoil (145). Sexuality was to be constrained, once again, to reinforce ideas of western middle-class whiteness.

Vietnam era, on the other hand, brought a new set of challenges to entertainment and recreation work, as the feminist, antiwar, civil rights, and black power movements challenged the expectations and roles of women. And yet, women were expected to once again embody the sense of home that was so foreign in the combat zone, by bringing the feminine to a masculine domain. Vuic argues that competing ideas over the all-American woman forced Donut Dollies, Special Services women, and USO workers to be both wholesome ideals and sexual objects. While these organizations attempted to resist these changes, they could not prevent them entirely, as "notions of femininity" and "notions of manhood were in flux and contested" (215).

In her conclusion, Vuic cites a 2003 USO performance as a "modern iteration of the conflicting, yet intertwined, ways the military and civilian organizations have utilized women in recreation and entertainment programs throughout the past century" (270). And yet, in the time of the All Volunteer Forces, recreation and entertainment efforts were forced to adapt to the new diverse military. While their goals remained the same, women's work itself was affected in ways that reflected the contradictions that were a part of recreation and entertainment work from the very beginning of the twentieth century.

Vuic's strength throughout this text is in the way she brings the voices of these women to the forefront of her argument. Her extensive use of diaries, letters, and interviews, allows the women she studies to speak for themselves. In weaving the stories of women into her narrative, Vuic strengthens her

argument about the ways in which women assigned their own meanings to their service and the value that they placed on their work as a form of freedom. Thus, the women themselves show how their work was a part of changing ideas of gender throughout the twentieth century, as their very presence on the front lines, not to mention their experiences there, challenged preconceived ideas of a woman's expected place. "While much of the actual and symbolic work they performed drew on conventional notions, of womanhood," Vuic argues, "much of their lives and wartime experiences failed to conform to tradition" (235).

While many historians have examined the wartime recreation and wartime work of women, no historian has ever created such a comprehensive study of the subject. Previous studies have either concentrated on one organization or one conflict, or highlighted the individual stories of entertainment and recreation workers in the context of women's service during wartime. Vuic's approach teases out the common threads that existed throughout the twentieth century. Thus, while Vuic's arguments concerning women symbolizing the home: a reminder of domesticity and a feminine influence on the men serving on the front lines, are not new, tracing the changing ideas of and expectations of women in these roles on such a large scale allows the reader to understand the importance of this work in a way previous studies do not. The work of women changed the military institution in profound and permanent ways that reflected the affect their work had on the meanings they assigned to their own service, this adding to previous historical scholarship in both military and gender history.

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