

The World of Poor Eve: Re-defining Women's Roles in Nineteenth Century Utopian Communities

DEIDRE HUGHES

Dainty as a Dresden statue; Gentle as a Jersey Cow; Smooth as silk gives creamy milk; Learn to coo; Learn to moo; That's how you come to be a lady now.

Peggy Seeger, "Gonna' Be An Engineer"

On February 11, 1822, Frances Wright, the founder of the Utopian Community, Nashoba, stated in a letter to her acquaintance General Lafayette,

I dare say you marvel sometimes at my independent way of walking through the world just as if nature had made me of your sex, instead of poor Eve's. Trust me my beloved friend, the mind has no sex but what habit and education give it, and I, who was thrown in infancy upon the waters, have learned as well to struggle with the elements as well as any child of Adam.¹

An exploration of the social role of nineteenth century women helps explain Wright's comments, which on the surface might seem derogatory toward her gender. Instead, Wright's statement reveals her understanding of society's construction of a woman's identity and her tenacity as she attempts to exceed social constraints through her creation of Nashoba.

Although recognized for their vision, utopian societies are oftentimes noted as failures rather than successes. A deeper examination, however, challenges the definitions by which utopias have been judged and necessitates the formulation of a new definition. Longevity has been the usual measure of success, and although some utopian communities survived the test of time- such as the Shakers who continue to exist- this is indeed a

rarity. Utopias have long been the topic of scholarly research, but only recently have historians focused on women's roles within these communities. If a utopian community was founded upon the ideal of creating an egalitarian society, it is imperative to examine women's roles in communities in contrast to their prescribed role in mainstream society. This examination provides a critical interpretation of utopias and generates different criteria of success and failure, while providing insight into nineteenth century society.

I surveyed four utopian communities and one woman's experience within two communities to examine how these societies did and did not re-define women's roles. This article also touches on race and class issues since, in utopias, they are often inseparable from gender issues. The communities studied include New Harmony in Indiana, Nashoba in Tennessee, Brook Farm in Massachusetts and The Sanctified Sisters, originally from Texas. Also studied are Sojourner Truth's experiences at The Kingdom in New York and the transcendentalist Northampton Association in Massachusetts. I examine women's roles based upon, and relevant to, the four attributes described in Barbara Welter's benchmark 1966 article entitled "The Cult of True Womanhood." In the nineteenth century, these criteria -- piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity -- were employed by society to judge the social merits of women.²

According to Welter, the "True Woman" was first of all regarded as inherently pious. In this study it was found that utopian women often re-defined this attribute since most of the utopias surveyed, including the Northampton Association, Nashoba, Brook Farm, and New Harmony, had no religious orientation.

The two most secular communities were New Harmony, established in 1825, and Brook Farm, established in 1841. New Harmony's founder, Robert Owen, defined what he called the "Evil Trinity" as Religion, Property, and Marriage. He believed that religion supported property and capitalism, thus enslaving people and resulting in crime.³ Brook Farm's *Constitution, Article 1, Section 2*, states, "No member of the Association shall ever be subjected to a religious test." In addition, a letter by a member of Brook Farm, Annie Salisburgs, stated that it was unpopular for members of the community to attend church due to the latter's strong bond to "civilization" in general.⁴

Conversely, two communities studied had a strong religious orientation: The Kingdom, established in the late 1820s, and the Sanctified Sisters, established in 1867. Although based on a religious doctrine, women in these communities too re-defined their "pious" nature through actions that were restricted in many other organized religions.

It is true, for example, that the renowned ex-slave, Sojourner Truth, joined The Kingdom due specifically to its member's shared religious

beliefs. Although Matthias, the dogmatic religious leader of the community, subsequently required that women refrain from speaking their views to the men at The Kingdom, Truth, during her stay at The Kingdom, enhanced her speaking skills and re-defined women's roles by preaching publicly about social reform.⁵

The Sanctified Sisters, alternatively, began as a prayer group. They re-defined women's roles by re-interpreting scriptures and church doctrine which challenged conventional women's roles. This action led to their expulsion from the Methodist church as well as alienation from many of their husbands, thus prompting them to leave their homes and create a shared community.⁶

Another criterion for the "True Woman" was purity. Respectable women thus traditionally refrained from actions that would label them as "fallen" or "loose." In varying degrees, all of the surveyed communities, conversely, had fewer restrictions on male and female interactions than were found in mainstream society. In fact, women and men enjoyed freedoms that raised suspicions about women's virtues.

In my survey, the two best examples of women re-defining purity standards were at Brook Farm and Nashoba. Brook Farm member Marianne Dwight described in a letter to a friend an evening where she and her roommate, for example, entertained two men in their rooms "playing whist and talking until 11:00."⁷

Of the communities surveyed, Nashoba was the most controversial community due to its scandalous reputation as a free love colony. Frances Wright's Nashoba, established in 1825, intended to provide an equal society for all races and sexes. Nashoba was to serve as a model for a safe transition into a slave-less society. Wright purchased slaves and provided them with food, housing, and education. The ex-slaves worked in the community, alongside white members, until the formerly enslaved people's purchase price was paid. Afterwards, these unshackled people would be relocated.⁸

Scandal plagued Nashoba when member James Richardson's diary was published along with member Camilla Wright's private letters. These documents revealed the frequency of sexual relations between unmarried men and women, including inter-racial sexual intercourse.⁹ Although most of the sexual encounters were consensual, Richardson's diary included an entry describing an incident of sexual assault of an African-American woman resident by a male member of the community¹⁰. The controversy surrounding Nashoba's sexual practices incited Wright to release a statement explaining the community's beliefs on sexuality. It read, "Women at Nashoba shrink equally from opprobrium stamped upon unlegalized connexions."¹¹ Wright's liberal sexual views and frequent lectures on women's rights, birth control, and divorce reform earned her the

title “Priestess of Beelzebub.”¹²

According to conventional nineteenth century beliefs, the “True Woman’s” main responsibility was to the home. Women’s thoughts and actions were to be centered in the home or they risked violating their True Womanhood. Many of the communities surveyed believed that domestic chores were oppressive and attempted, in varying degrees, to alleviate those burdens. They believed that women could work in the public sphere with men for equal pay. Northampton (established in 1842), and New Harmony attempted to relieve the burden of domestic work through projects such as community dining halls and laundries. In reality, equality was never achieved because women were still confined to “women’s roles” such as cooking in the dining hall and other domestic chores.¹³ Article 21 of New Harmony’s constitution states,

The employments [sic] of the female part of the committee consists, in preparing food and clothing; in the care of the dwelling houses, dormitories, and public buildings; in the management of the washing and drying houses; in the education (in part) of the children, and in other occupations suited to the female character...¹⁴

Moreover, women’s lives doubled in hardships when married couples were encouraged to take in single members. Eliza M’knight’s husband recalled,

Twelve members boarded at our house and my wife, though a delicate woman, cooked for them, until she became so worn out with fatigue that I was obliged to hire a girl to assist her. She was told this problem would be over as soon as the public dining room could be finished. However... the president of the community then instructed Eliza to go to the public kitchen and cook for everyone, despite his promises to her for a resting spell.¹⁵

Later, at Brook Farm, women re-defined the concept of domesticity with lives that were not centered on the home, but rather in personal intellectual and cultural growth. According to founder, George Ripley, Brook Farm’s goal was:

...to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents...To do away [with] the necessity of menial service, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all.¹⁶

In reality, though, women performed most of the domestic chores as well and were sometimes heavily burdened due to the small number of women in membership. Still, men and women re-defined gender relations by engaging in some non-traditional forms of work.¹⁷ Brook Farm women

extended their roles into the public sphere by serving on various committees within the community's government and by voting on issues concerning the community. Also, they were encouraged to grow intellectually and culturally through classes in history, foreign languages, mathematics, music, and art. In addition, the community had relaxed views on separation and divorce.¹⁸ Furthermore, women sometimes worked alongside men for equal pay, although women often worked in sex-segregated groupings. Marianne Dwight's letter to a female friend reveals that a feminist consciousness did ultimately develop. It states,

And now I must interest you in our fancy group, for which and from which I hope great things—nothing less than the elevation of woman to independence, and an acknowledged equality with man...Women must become producers of marketable articles; women must make money and earn their support independently of man...Of course, if we succeed (and we are determine we will), it will be very desirabel [sic] for other ladies to come here on purpose to take part in our fancy work...when funds accumulate (!) [sic] we may start other branches of business, so that all our proceeds must be applied to the elevation of woman forever. Take a spiritual view of the matter. Raise woman to be the equal of a man, and what intellect developments may we not expect? How the whole aspect of society will be changed!¹⁹

Another interesting example of women re-defining domestic and submissive roles were the Sanctified Sisters. As mentioned earlier, the Sisters originated as a prayer group in their Methodist church. These meetings had evolved into consciousness raising gatherings. During their meetings, the sisters voiced concerns about the unfair treatment of women by society and abusive, drunken, or oppressive husbands. The church and the women's husbands disapproved of the Sisters' interpretations of the Bible. Consequently the women were excommunicated from the church and they then excommunicated themselves from their "unholy" husbands.²⁰ They knew that for women to survive independently from men, it would require collective living.²¹ They implemented their domestic skills in order to earn money and become independent from their oppressive and/or abusive husbands. Initially, they sold eggs and butter, and later became entrepreneurs through the development of a laundry service and hotel in Texas and later several boarding houses and hotels in the eastern part of the United States and in Florida.²²

Although the Sister's organization consisted solely of women, they claimed that they were not exclusive of men. However, as one sister stated, men are "welcome if they are willing to live the life we do. But they never stay long... it is in the nature of men to want to boss—and, well, they find they can't..."²³

Despite all of these challenges to the notion of "True Womanhood", utopian communities are often noted as failures in general and, in certain

respects, they failed in ways that cannot be ignored. One cannot say that New Harmony, The Kingdom, Brook Farm, and the Northampton Association provided a completely egalitarian society when they kept women confined to traditional female jobs. Nashoba's broad vision of a slave-less society failed miserably. The ex-slaves were not treated equally, they were still referred to as "the slaves," and, in reality they were indentured servants. Why did these communities, with their vision and inspirational rhetoric and ideals fail at some of their goals? Perhaps Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* offers a solution to this enigma:

Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.²⁴

This land is your land; This land is my land.

Woody Guthrie, "This Land is Your Land"

Utopian societies have made an important contribution to North American history. Their uniqueness derives from their attempts to create their own circumstances. Their shortcomings reveal deeply imbedded cultural racism and sexism from which they could not escape at that time. However, by dismissing these utopias as failures due to the limited years that they existed, or faulting them for their susceptibility to, as Marx states, "the tradition of all the dead generations," one engages in oversimplification and a disservice to these communities as well as history in general. Their success and failure lies in their recognition of areas where mainstream society did not meet the needs of its people and the specific ways in which they attempted to remedy society's ills.

Simply put, utopian communities were ahead of their time. During a time when women activists were first speaking of equal rights, New Harmony's women worked in the public sphere for equal pay. Owen altered marriage vows to ensure equality and believed in educating boys and girls equally. In Nashoba, Wright's plan of an equal society for African-Americans failed in many respects; however, she did attempt to end slavery during the same period that William Lloyd Garrison was just forming his abolition movement and nine years before the formation of the Female Anti-Slavery Society. Furthermore, Nashoba preceded the civil rights movement with its integrated school system. Frances Wright, who was

influenced by Robert Owen, valued education. Wright believed that educating African-American and Caucasian boys and girls together, was the key to eliminating racism- something not attempted on a large scale until more than a century later and arguably still undone. At Brook Farm, women worked in the community and were respected for their intellect. Moreover, they were allowed to vote at a time when, in mainstream society, they would have been evicted from the polling booths, or, like Susan B. Anthony more than thirty years after the demise of Brook Farm, arrested for such inappropriate behavior. The Sanctified Sisters lived successfully from their husbands and men in general. And, Sojourner Truth worked alongside white members and enhanced her speaking skills at The Kingdom. In addition, she was exposed to the abolition movement at Northampton when William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass lectured at the community.

Thus, it is difficult to assess the legacy of utopian societies. More research is needed to have a deeper understanding of their meaning and impact. One often reads of Truth's and Wright's activities and accomplishments after they left communal groups. But, what happened to the women of Brook Farm, New Harmony, and the other communities after their utopian experiences? How did these undertakings influence their lives and the lives of their children? What impression, for example, did the Sanctified Sisters have on the residents of their boarding houses? History texts mostly devote small sections to utopian communities and oftentimes historians talk about them with a smirk on their faces. Most utopias were indeed short-lived. However, they should not be noted as asinine failures, but recognized instead for their vision and their audacious attempt to create a society where a person is more noticed for, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "the content of their character, not the color of their skin." Or, with regard to many utopian societies, a society where members were not judged based upon particular class or gender identities.

ENDNOTES

¹ Wright MSS, Frances Wright to General Lafayette, February 11, 1822; quoted in William Randall Waterman, *Frances Wright* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924), 74-75. Bensman, Marilyn, "Frances Wright: Utopian Feminist" in *Women in Search of Utopia*. Rohrlich, Ruby and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 64.

² Welter, Barbara, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18:2 (Summer 1966): 151.

³ Lockwood, George B., *The New Harmony Movement* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 146.

⁴ Annie M. Salisbury, *Brook Farm* (Marlboro, Mass.: F.B. Estabrook, 1898); reprinted, with slight changes, from "The Real Brook Farm," *Boston Evening Transcript* (27 October, 3 November 1894), 13. Myerson, Joel, *The Brook Farm Book: A Collection of First-Hand Accounts of the Community* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 241.

⁵ Chmielewski, Wendy E. "Sojourner Truth" in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell, eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 26-28.

⁶ *Ibid.* 54-57; Kitch, Sally L., *This Strange Society of Women* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 36-38.

⁷ Marianne Dwight, letter to Anna Parsons (April 27, 1844), in Dwight, Marianne, *Letters from Brook Farm: 1844-1847*. Amy L. Reed, ed., (New York: Norwood Press, 1997), 12-13.

⁸ Bensman, Marilyn. "Frances Wright: Utopian Feminist" in *Women in Search of Utopia*. Rohrlich, Ruby and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 63, 65-66.

⁹ *Ibid.* 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 67.; Webber, Everett. *Escape to Utopia*, (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1959), 116-117.

¹¹ Bensman, Marilyn, "Frances Wright: Utopian Feminist" in *Women in Search of Utopia*. Rohrlich, Ruby and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 67.

¹² Webber, Everett, *Escape to Utopia* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1959), 155.

¹³ Chmielewski, Wendy E. "Sojourner Truth" in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell, eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 31. Harsin, Jill, "Housework and Utopia: Women and the Owenite Socialist Communities" in *Women in Search of Utopia*. Rohrlich, Ruby and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 79.

¹⁴ Harsin, Jill. "Housework and Utopia: Women and the Owenite Socialist Communities" in *Women in Search of Utopias*. Rohrlich, Ruby and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 78-79.

¹⁵ Kolmerten, Carol A. "Women's Experiences in the American Owenite Communities" in *Women in Search of Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 42-43.

¹⁶ Freibert, Lucy M, "Women of Brook Farm" in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 75-76.

¹⁷ Freibert, Lucy M. "Women of Brook Farm" in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 71-72.

¹⁸ Sophia Eastman letter to Mehitable Eastman (July 25, 1843) in Sams, Henry W. ed. *Autobiography of Brook Farm* (Inglewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 82. Codman, J.T. *Brook Farm: Historic and Personal Memoirs* (Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1894), 135. Freibert, Lucy M. "Women of Brook Farm" in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 75.

¹⁹ Marianne Dwight, letter to Anna Parsons (August 30, 1844) in Dwight, Marianne. *Letters from Brook Farm: 1844-1847*. Amy L. Reed, ed. (New York: Norwood Press, 1997), 32-33.

²⁰ Kitch, Sally L. *This Strange Society of Women* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 12, 36-39. Chmielewski, Wendy E. "Heaven on Earth", *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell, eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 54, 56-57.

²¹ Kitch, Sally L. *This Strange Society of Women* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 12-13.

²² Chmielewski, Wendy E. "Heaven on Earth", *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*. Chmielewski, Wendy E., Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell, eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 54, 56-57.

²³ Ibid. 62.

²⁴ Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1978), 594.

