A sociologist by training, Bart Landry has a remarkable gift for historical thinking, including that rare ability to elucidate the significance of the historical moment in which he is writing: a transitional phase in family life in which married women of all backgrounds have rapidly increased their labour force participation, even while caring for young children, a period in which the “traditional” family of a male breadwinner and a stay-at-home wife is increasingly rare. The new dual-worker or dual-career family form, he notes, “is not yet fully institutionalised and does not always function smoothly” (165).

His argument, simply put, is that black wives’ history of labour force participation, often on a voluntary basis, pioneered this new family form, initiating the prospect of more egalitarian marriages. Landry’s historical and sociological synthesis shatters stereotypes of the black family, restores black women to their rightful place as key agents in the history of the American family, and clearly articulates the central social, cultural, and public policy issues raised by the paradigm shift towards a new kind of family. The breadth of his vision and the power of his argument make this a compelling and important book, and an excellent example of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Landry begins with the important reminder that the two-parent family, though dramatically changed in recent decades, is still a vitally important social institution among both blacks and whites: “two-parent families not only remain the norm but the statistical majority among white and—until very recently—black families as well,” and “about half 48.9 percent) of
black families were still headed by couples in 1996” (1, 9). His analysis then becomes historical, explaining the origins of the “traditional” family in the separation of home and workplace brought about by the industrial revolution. The rise of the “traditional” family in the nineteenth century was accompanied by a decline in women’s producer status, and by the potent ideology of “true womanhood,” which defined women as submissive, pious, pure, and domestic. Yet, as Landry points out, about 3 per cent of nineteenth-century families could afford to support a totally “domestic” wife, one who did not contribute economically to the family (3). Obviously, the ideal of confinement of the woman to the home was out of reach of many women of all races who were not wealthy. Moreover, ideologically, racist arguments about blacks defined them out of “true womanhood” anyway; in the view of whites, they could not be “pure.”

But Landry argues convincingly that black women themselves valued employment for wives in a way that white women did not. He shows that in the black middle class in particular, one cannot explain black–white differences in married women’s labour force participation purely on the basis of economic need, from the late nineteenth century to the present. For example, elite activist black women of the Progressive era were working wives in numbers far disproportionate to white women of comparable class position. By the early twentieth century, black middle-class wives, those who often did not work out of necessity, “championed a ‘threefold commitment’ to family, community, and careers” (6). Landry’s inclusion of black women’s voices from the Progressive era makes the motivations of at least some middle-class black women quite clear, as in Anna Julia Cooper’s statement: “The question is not now with the woman ‘How shall I so cramp, stunt, and simplify and nullify myself as to make me eligible to the honor of being swallowed up into some little man?’ but the problem . . . rests with the man as to how he can so develop . . . to reach the ideal of a generation of women who demand the noblest, grandest and best achievements of which he is capable” (68–69).

The important point is that racially distinct patterns of wives’ labour force participation, and often accompanying attitudes about woman’s proper place, persisted with remarkable tenacity through the course of the twentieth century. Moving from historical synthesis to his own analysis of census data and summaries of survey data, Landry explains:

By 1940 almost four out of ten black middle-class wives fit this (two-earner) model, compared with fewer than two in ten whites . . . In fact, throughout the next fifty-four-years, black middle-class wives’ rate of employment stayed about two decades ahead of their white counterparts . . . By 1994 only about 14 percent of two-parent black middle-class families fit the traditional model, while about 24 percent of white middle-class families still did. (90)

Why was this the case?

Upper-middle-class whites developed the ideology of domestic-
ity, an ideology gradually adopted by white families of other classes. Black upper-middle-class wives, on the other hand, rejected domesticity and produced their own competing ideology—an ideology that encouraged combining work outside the home with marriage and family. (93)

Landry provides a wide range of convincing and fascinating data on the differences in married women’s employment by race, as well as class, exploring issues such as continuity of wives’ employment, employment of wives with young children, and the growing contribution of wives’ income to the twentieth-century family economy. Throughout these explorations, his basic argument that black women pioneered the dual-income marriage, even the dual-income marriage with small children, remains clear, convincing, and perceptive. This is an important corrective to the tendency of historical scholarship to attribute the rise of the egalitarian marriage ideal to white middle-class women.

The corrective to family history in general, with its focus on the agency of the white middle-class, becomes even more salient as Landry explores another side of the family revolution: husbands of working women. Landry appropriately acknowledges that husbands’ growth in contributions to housework has certainly not constituted a revolution, and that working women of all backgrounds are left with disproportionate burdens of housework and childcare. Still, Landry clearly demonstrates that on average black husbands of working women contribute more time than their white counterparts to family chores, including traditionally female tasks such as grocery shopping and laundry. This is true regardless of class: “In rank order, black middle-class husbands contributed most to housework, followed by working-class black husbands, middle-class white husbands, and then working-class white husbands” (161).

The capstone to this excellent synthesis is a concluding chapter which situates women’s continued struggles as workers in the context of lack of support, not just from husbands, but also from childcare policy and employers. Unlike European policies of support for working mothers, which contribute enormously to their children’s welfare, the United States policies have repeatedly ignored or penalised working mothers and their children. President Nixon’s 1972 veto of legislation to establish a national day-care system and President Bush’s 32 vetoes of legislation that would eventually become the Family Medical Leave Act provide prominent examples.

Like all clearly written syntheses, Black Working Wives makes insightful contributions, while also raising a host of questions. A few of these questions deserved more acknowledgment, even within a short text. For example, does income automatically equal power within marriage for women? Landry often suggests this: “If the breadwinner role has given the husband power and control in the traditional family, then by sharing this role the wife breaks his stranglehold on control and authority.” If so, how is it possible
that even with such a long tradition of dual-earner marriages black husbands of working wives are far from full participants in household work?

Moreover, women’s employment is not always liberating, or undertaken as a means to liberation or personal fulfilment, a point that becomes obscured by the focus on the middle class in this book. Landry clearly shows that pressing economic need cannot explain the consistent pattern of middle-class black women’s comparatively high rate of participation in the labour force. But even so, I wondered if the majority of black middle-class women entered the labour force primarily out of interest in self-fulfilment. Just how secure were black middle class husbands in the period when black women pioneered this mode, given the excruciating vulnerability of all blacks in the United States at this time? Might not even middle-class married black women’s labour force participation have been part of a strategy of career and income security for the household, even without pressing economic need? And might not such a strategy still be desirable in more recent decades?

Landry’s book could have also staved off some important questions about his data by offering a clearer explanation of the strengths of limitations of historical data from the census. For example, he could have clearly acknowledged the historic under-representation of women’s income-producing activities in the census. Finally, I think Landry’s explanation of the latter half of the twentieth century would have been strengthened if he had balanced his statistical analysis with the level of attention to qualitative sources that he displayed for the earlier period. After the compelling attention to ideology voiced by black women like Anna Julia Cooper at the turn of the century, oddly enough, we hear very little in the voices of black women in the latter half of the century. And after a century of continuous change in gender ideology and women’s lives, these voices would add much to an already fascinating examination of black women’s historical agency.

JODI VANDENBERG-DAVES
University of Wisconsin–La Crosse