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## ***Bomb Girls, Gender, and Working-Class History***

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## Bomb Girls, Gender, and Working-Class History

Joan Sangster

WORKING-CLASS WOMEN have not fared well in television, factory women especially so. Rarely have we seen blue-collar women coping with a moving assembly line, health hazards, shared showers, and dreary cafeterias. Laverne and Shirley's work at the bottle plant was one early exception, as were dramas like *Cagney and Lacey*, or comedies like *Roseanne* or *Grace Under Fire*. More common since the 1980s have been stories featuring professional women, usually in the "cop, doc, and lawyer" genres, and English-Canadian broadcasting has not differed significantly from the US in this regard. Even feminist scholarship about television has often occluded discussion of class relations and labour, opting for a more homogenized, liberal feminist analysis.

This absence makes *Bomb Girls* a novel anomaly, and its wartime setting renders it particularly interesting for historians since the series laid claim to historical authenticity as one of its key selling points. Promotion of the show repeatedly cited its faithful attention to historical research: from its story lines to fashion and music, from material objects to period sensibilities, the show's website extolled its historical accuracy. It even featured an interview with a former munitions worker who talks about her work, the boarding house experience, and wartime society.

The wartime setting, I believe, provided the producers with the *licence* to tell the stories of women on the factory floor. Can we imagine someone trying to sell a production company the idea of a dramatic series on women working in an auto parts or fish processing factory today? The idea would likely be given short shrift. Period or costume dramas give us permission to feature themes otherwise seen as mundane, and a quick glance at any Chapters/Indigo "History" section also reminds us that the history of war sells. This is somewhat ironic since one historical interpretation of Canadian women's role in World War II stresses that many women were drawn into non-traditional work with encouraging state policies and propaganda only to be pushed out of such jobs after the war. In other words, television shows can feature women on an assembly line, even cast working-class women as heroines, as long as this takes place in a temporary setting of World War II.

My analysis of *Bomb Girls* encompasses such a critical perspective, but it is also appreciative of some of the writing, what the series tried to accomplish, and the themes it attempted to cover. For teaching especially, *Bomb Girls* offers an excellent opportunity to hold up history as portrayed in mass culture to the scrutiny of evidence and debate. We can ask how contemporary television would compare to popular cultural sources of the time, whether TV writers draw effectively on academic historical interpretations, and we can contrast *Bomb Girls* to other fictional renditions of war work, such as Jeanette

Lynes recent novel, *The Factory Voice*.<sup>1</sup> *Bomb Girls* reminds us of the immense potential of popular culture – television, theatre, film or magazines – to engage audiences in ways that we, as academic historians, do not, and it productively raises critical issues about the home front ignored in more celebratory histories of the battlefield.

We also need to situate any critique of *Bomb Girls* in the political economy context of Canadian broadcasting. In our American-dominated television market, Canadian-themed shows are notoriously hard to finance with any degree of production sophistication. Moreover, these financial realities can lead to compromises demanded by financial backers who are less interested in historical authenticity – and not at all in feminism – and more in ratings and advertising. Funders can ask that scripts be rewritten to please the particular “tastes” they perceive audiences have: they might ask for more romance, fewer factory scenes – and one wonders if any such requests were given to *Bomb Girls*.

Moreover, historical fiction of any genre inevitably takes liberties with the facts. Fiction, after all, involves fantasy; historical analysis does not. Rather, as professional historians reflecting on popular renditions of women’s history, I think we should look for a historically informed sensibility for the time period being depicted: does *Bomb Girls* offer a view of women in wartime society that raises some pertinent questions about relations of power, inequality, social relations, women’s experiences, and women’s agency? Does it convey a respectful sensitivity to the struggles and lives of many working-class women? Does it create a powerful narrative that *might* have happened in this time period, without excessive distortion of the context, without casting the story entirely through presentist eyes? And as television consumers, we should not ignore the seemingly indulgent question: is it pleasurable to watch?

The roles women play on mainstream television have been hotly debated since the 1970s; feminism and especially the changing patterns of women’s paid labour have recast TV offerings, though some dismaying post-feminist (really anti-feminist) trends emerged after the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The more recent decline of network dominance and rise of cable, argue some optimistic feminists, provide us with the possibility of moving beyond the dominating, stock sitcom or drama stories into “multiple possibilities” of strong female characters, more acceptable to cable’s project of narrowcasting to smaller, niche audiences.<sup>3</sup>

1. Jeanette Lynes, *The Factory Voice* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2009).

2. Bonnie Dow, *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Elizabeth Kaufer Busch, “Ally McBeal to Desperate Housewives: A Brief History of the Postfeminist Heroine,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, 2 (Spring 2009): 87–97.

3. Amanda D. Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

If “narrowcasting” is an industry buzzword, why did *Bomb Girls* get cut after only two seasons, despite a devoted fan base, some positive reviews, an acting award for the lead character, even an online campaign, “Save Bomb Girls,” which raised \$5,500 to send Victory bandanas to Global tv? Clearly audiences were loyal, but not large enough, though we might also ask how the story could have continued after the war’s end, since World War II *was* the story. The show’s loyal audience likely appreciated the series for the same reasons earlier women viewers welcomed new programs in the 1970s and 1980s about working mothers: they wanted stories that reflected real issues of daily life, discussed women’s friendships as well as romances, and suggested women’s labour was important to social life.

To its credit, *Bomb Girls* does not simply idealize “Ronnie, the Bren Gun Girl,” as the NFB did at the time, and the scripts suggest that the majority of women in the factory were there because they needed the jobs and/or wanted the higher wages munitions work offered. Betty wants desperately to buy a house to secure her independence; Kate has run away from an abusive father and must support herself; Lorna supports her family, including her husband, disabled in World War I; Vera too has left an unhappy home; and African Canadian Reggie lies about her age just to get this better-paying job. Like the African-Canadian women war workers interviewed by Dionne Brand, she likely was keen to escape the narrow confines of domestic and service labour.<sup>4</sup>

Promotional material for the show emphasized women’s search for economic independence, although it also misrepresents the lives of most working-class women. *Bomb Girls*, one producer explains, is “the story of women who risked their lives in a munitions factory. Women from all walks of life are thrust into new worlds and changed profoundly as they are liberated from their home and social restrictions. They have a pay check for the first time.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the majority of women in munitions had come from other working-class jobs; the idea they had never worked before was rather far-fetched (unless this was their very first job due to youth), as was the idea they came from “all walks of life” and were “liberated” by their work.

While the factory setting in *Bomb Girls* may appear less quickly paced, less monitored, and less exhausting than factory work actually was, some negative issues about munitions work are broached; the cordite used in bomb making is so toxic that it turns women’s hair yellow, making them “canaries” a term that for the knowledgeable viewer conjures up the “canary in the coal mine.” Pregnant women are banned due to severe health risks, and they are forced

4. Dionne Brand, “We weren’t allowed to go into factory work until Hitler started the war: the 1920s to the 1940s,” in Peggy Bristow et al. eds., *We’re Rooted Here And They Can’t Pull Us Up: Essays in African-Canadian Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994): 177–181.

5. Producer Adrienne Mitchell on <http://www.globaltv.com/bombgirls/index.html>, accessed 10 August 2014.

to have regular x-rays, both suggesting lasting danger to their bodies. One of the most powerful scenes, because it is so cringeworthy, comes in the opening episode when Vera's hair is caught on a hook moving upward, and she loses a good part of her scalp, disfiguring her for life. The plastic surgeons initially refuse to reconstruct her face as they have other more pressing (soldier) cases; Lorna, the matron in charge of the factory "girls," challenges him, arguing that Vera too is a soldier – just one working in a factory.

Realistically, the factory is also a racial, ethnic, and gendered hierarchy, with "only the Chinese"<sup>6</sup> working in the kitchen, a token Black man in the storage room, white men (even ethnic, racialized white men) in skilled work, and women divided socially into two factions by their white- and blue-collar jobs. The shop floor is also beset with gender tensions; women's incursion into men's work has ruffled some masculine feathers. When there is a serious injury during the testing of a bomb, the men pin it on women's shoddy work, even though they know an intoxicated man was the likely culprit. The men also respond to women with wolf whistles, harassment, and peepholes into their locker room. They are openly incensed when a feminist journalist, "Dottie," played with gusto by Rosie O'Donnell, reports that Lorna's wages are shockingly low compared to men's despite the fact that she does more work and has more responsibility. Lorna is then made to suffer their ire.

Naïve, upper-class Gladys, who has come from Rosedale to do her bit for the war, abandons her white-collar job in the plant for the assembly line, and she is especially horrified at the verbal abuse women take. She tries unsuccessfully to have them complain to the boss, only to have them turn on her, remarking "she is just going to get us fired."<sup>7</sup> She then turns an old hat box into a suggestion box so women can voice their complaints anonymously. The men quickly fill it up with their own notes: "why don't you quit your job so a man can do his," "get out of the trousers and back in the kitchen, yet, get into my trousers" they write.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the women, as well as the "good" (i.e., non-sexist) male workers featured, including Italian Canadian Marco, recognize the men "don't want to feel replaceable";<sup>9</sup> they are deeply anxious that the women will choose to stay working after the war. Some women are also uncertain about their untraditional work and stress its temporary nature, although this is primarily articulated by Lorna who is instinctively conservative when it comes to protecting existing gender and familial roles. She is nonetheless slowly persuaded that women deserve better pay and more respect, in part because of her own breadwinning role and in part because of her dedication to the diligent women she supervises. Yet, she abandons any fight for equal pay for all

6. *Bomb Girls* (BG), Series 2, Episode 2.

7. BG, Series 1, Episode 2.

8. BG, Series 1, Episode 2.

9. BG, Series 2, Episode 9.

women, accepting a raise for herself, justifying this with Dottie's thoroughly individualist rationalization: "someone has to be first through the door."<sup>10</sup> Lorna's ambivalence about altering gender roles is symbolized well in a scene in which Edith, recently widowed by the war, can return to work because her children can attend a wartime day nursery. "I wish they had these before the war," enthuses Edith to her fellow workers. Lorna snaps back, "Why would you have a child if you are not going to look after it?" thus reiterating precisely the ideological resistance to daycare that was voiced after the war.<sup>11</sup>

An understanding that women's work culture was shaped by their lives both on and off the factory floor is also integral to some scripts. Many of the young, single women live in the same rooming house where they build a shared female sociability network around booze, dancing, makeup, and gossip. Some characters are experimenting with new forms of pleasure, whether it is painted nails, dancing, drinking, or singing in public, because they have escaped the overbearing surveillance of the nuclear family, whether intentionally or not. Betty, for instance, a closeted lesbian, has fled the drudgery and patriarchal ordering of the family farm, as well as knowledge in her community that her family's name was once Germanic. Like a character in *The Factory Voice*, these young women use slightly enhanced economic opportunities to imagine less confining lives, a theme echoed in the secondary historical literature on women, work, sexuality, and World War II.

It is these bonds of female friendship across lines of class and race (however unrealistic from our point of view) that undoubtedly appealed to some viewers, even though the series also put enormous emphasis on women's heterosexual romances. Indeed, the entangled mix of women's love lives, family, and work dilemmas is reminiscent of the 1940s "women's weepie" genre of film while the themes of sacrifice, love, and tragedy mirror wartime films in which the plucky mother/woman like Mrs. Miniver carries on heroically despite the wartime destruction around her.

Some scripts also explored the blue-collar workplace as an imagined space of sexual upheaval, danger, and promiscuity. This class-based typecasting of working-class women, argue some historians, was heightened by wartime fears of endangered femininity as women stepped into men's shoes, even though (again realistically) women were rarely doing masculine-typed skilled work such as engineering; more often they performed semi-skilled assembly line tasks. Indeed, the scenes in which Betty trains new recruits echo findings from Ruth Roach Pierson's book, as Betty reassures them the work process is similar to domestic tasks. If you can pour tea ladies, she tells them, you can pour amatol into bombs.<sup>12</sup>

10. BG, Series 2, Episode 9.

11. BG, Series 2, Episode 2.

12. Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).

The constructed image of working-class women's "out of control" sexuality is inserted through both offhand remarks and more direct denigration of the women workers, some of whom are keen to defend their honour while still having a good time. Gladys lies to her parents about switching her job to the shop floor; when they find out, they are furious with her for risking a "loose reputation" by "slumming it with beer and workers."<sup>13</sup> The middle-class factory manager has a similar view: he wants "husky" women working in the factory, and at first cares little for Lorna's attempt to create a "code of moral conduct" so that men are not "rubbing up against" women in the cafeteria line and there is no "hanky-panky" in the storage room.<sup>14</sup> But after he sees an African Canadian male worker, Leon, merely touching white girl Kate on the arm in the storeroom, his revulsion leads him to endorse a code of conduct. (In a scene meant to be ironic, Lorna is then seduced by Marco as she mimeographed copies of her code of conduct one night, in a liaison that seems rather unlikely, but later provides an abortion sideline story.) Anxieties about loose if not deviant women are reiterated by the bulldog detective who is determined to arrest Betty and Kate for the murder of Kate's abusive father. Factory work, he asserts, "corrupts" women. "Women hold our moral centre," he lectures to them, but "the war is stripping all of that away."<sup>15</sup> He believes that "the jobs we do pervert girls," observes Betty perceptively.

Themes of sexual experimentation, guilt, sexual regulation, and the difficulty of disrupting traditional heterosexual relations reappear often. Sex was fraught with dangers for working-class women, including unwanted pregnancies; experimentation was not simply "liberation." Certainly, Betty finds love with another woman, but encounters some virulent homophobia along the way. Vera's many liaisons with soldiers and her designation as a "patriotute" leads to ridicule at work. The (rather unlikely) cross-race relationship of Lorna's daughter and nurse-in-training Sheila with a South Asian doctor culminates in her parents' intervention as they confront the "brown" doctor they fear will ruin her reputation. To Lorna's horror, the doctor informs her that his upper-class, Brahmin family would never let him marry "down" to a white, working-class woman.

Divisions exist in the country, just as they do in the factory. While some factory women, especially those with loved ones in the forces, extol the defeat of fascism, the initial episodes also hint at some doubts and disagreements, a realistic portrayal of wartime tension and social conflict. Political internment, propaganda, and profiteering are but three examples of themes explored. The internment of Marco's father for being a member of the Sons of Italy and the devastation internment visits on his family and their business is dealt with at some length. Ethnocentric assumptions about Italians simply bolster the

13. BG, Series 1, Episode 1; Series 2, Episode 1.

14. BG, Series 1, Episode 1; Series 1, Episode 4.

15. BG, Series 2, Episode 12.

state's unfair internment; both working-class Lorna (pre-seduction by Marco) and upper-class Mrs. Witham (Gladys' mother) uncritically imbibe the notion of Italian disloyalty. The always unpleasant Mrs. Witham decrees the state should just intern all the Italians!

Press reports, it is also intimated, often offer the workers a propagandistic gloss on the actual war effort; if the women think they are getting the truth when they read "The Telly" together at the factory gate, it is implied, they are not. The sad truth about Dieppe is hidden from these women, a fact Lorna's working-class husband, a cynical vet, quickly realizes: "they are fooling us with doublespeak about victory."<sup>16</sup> Still tormented by his own World War I nightmares, he is suspicious of the entire war effort: "I see they are giving out medals like gumdrops....The war machine buys off boys with bits of brass," he says cynically. "If they wanted to remember the war on Armistice Day," he tells his shocked, patriotic wife, "they could spread the bodies of teenage boys out on the street."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, he later abandons his critique of the war, making him a far less interesting character.

Finally, the way in which the economic benefits of war are unevenly distributed in terms of class is obliquely suggested through the profiteering issue. Gladys' father is angling for war contracts in the food industry, and he has few qualms about sending some sub-standard goods overseas because the spoiled cans are so few in number – and the promise of profits so great. The always-righteous Gladys puts an end to this by threatening to serve them the tainted goods for dinner. Yet, her father always manages to turn the war into dollars. Even a Red Cross benefit the family hosts is just another pitch for a new war contract, and although they object to Gladys' factory work, her father plasters his daughter's image as a munitions worker all over his company product as a means of selling his patriotism – and his product.

While the interconnections between women, love, friendship, and work are clearly the centrepiece of *Bomb Girls*, there is some discussion of working-class masculinity. In a theme undoubtedly shaped by present-day concerns, some soldiers and former soldiers are beset by PTSD, anger, and fear. Lorna's son Eugene oscillates between hyper-masculine bravado and self-destructive behaviour while Gladys' fiancé admits to being terrified of going overseas. Marco's masculinity is questioned, not only by others, but also by himself because he is *not* allowed to sign up. Despite his angst at being treated like "dirt ... a second class"<sup>18</sup> citizen, his own self-respect clearly depends on wearing a uniform.

Unfortunately, Marco and other male workers are often cast in rather one dimensional roles. While the majority of factory men are suspicious of women's new work roles, a few defend women's dignity; the latter are usually

16. BG, Series 2, Episode 7.

17. BG, Series 1, Episode 5.

18. BG, Series 2, Episode 6.

the outcast men, like Italian Marco (rather stereotypically explosive in nature) and African-Canadian Leon – and I believe this equation was intentional in the script. Despite his evangelical church-going ways, Leon immediately has insight into (and tolerance for) lesbian Betty, and he heroically saves Kate from sexual assault by a white factory worker. His insights also lead to Kate's new found musical identity; he is, in fact, an almost clairvoyant knower of all things, always exhibiting kindness, courage, integrity, and compassion. But are we then simplifying or stereotyping these outsider men?

There are also attempts to connect relations of class, ethnicity, and race, not only on the factory floor but also in the wider social context. There are many references made to the small mindedness of Toronto the Good, a city encased in both class rigidities and a dominating Anglo-British, white superiority. Scenes make clear the wildly different lifestyles of the rich Whithams, with their servants, spacious house, and immaculately kept gardens, in contrast to the rooming house where working-class women's laundry hangs communally in the corridor, and they share a telephone and bathroom. The city's ruling class is simultaneously hyper-British. Upper-middle-class, snobby Carol, who works as a secretary in the plant office and routinely looks down on the working-class women on the shop floor, is giddily (and ridiculously) hysterical with anticipation when the British (royal) Governor General visits the factory. The narrow Britishness of the city is conveyed in small cultural touches: food is just one of these. Faced with a plate of spaghetti at Marco's house, Lorna, who only cooks chops and roasts, does not even know how to eat it (and later serves her husband canned spaghetti, which is terrible). The bland Brits don't even eat olives. It is these small touches, as well as many references to material objects and also public personalities of the time, that suggest the writers have made an effort to create a believable, historical, spatial, and cultural setting.

Instances of discrimination and violence are also featured; the series touches on ethnicity and ethnic discrimination, race and racism, sexism and homophobia, disabled people, a feminist critique of the double standard, anti-Semitism, and class divisions. It's a dizzying list. Yet, class is dealt with in one of the least satisfactory ways; it is alluded to, then negated, raised but suppressed. While gender upheavals on the factory floor and women's networks of *female* solidarity are portrayed with some acuity, something is missing: a collective notion of class antagonism and conflict. An understanding of class as a structural relationship that is intrinsic to capitalism, or even class as a daily lived experience, is underdeveloped or mechanically presented. Class becomes messily obscured by the clear idealization of the upper-class heroine as the spunky, venturesome leader of the factory floor.

Many upper-class characters in *Bomb Girls* are unappealing, but they are also stereotypes. Gladys' mother, a bitter, gin-soaked snob is a case in point; she spends her days fussing over appearances, status, and where to sit her upper-class friends at Gladys' wedding ("you can't sit the pro and anti-conscription people together," she tells Gladys). "When you are top shelf," she sniffs, there are

always people to “take you down.”<sup>19</sup> One is reminded of cartoons in both mainstream and working-class papers that featured the “enemy”: oversized, bourgeois women clad in furs, obtuse to anything but their own self-indulgent lives.

It is Gladys, however, who is the centrepiece of *Bomb Girls*. She is spunky, venturesome, and rebellious in all the right ways; she questions discrimination, the double standard, unfairness, and injustice. Internment shocks her: “it is hard to believe we are living in Canada,” she declares after driving Marco and his mother to Petawawa to see his father. She challenges her own family’s corruption and ethnocentrism and is always on hand to help out her working-class pals at Victory Munitions, with everything from a sympathetic ear to financial aid. Gladys represents the myth that persists of the middle- and upper-class women who went to work in the factories for patriotic reasons: the “women from all walks of life,” noted by the *Bomb Girls* producer.

The focus on Gladys, who so effortlessly crosses class lines, discounts the actual history of working women, in which Rosedale lasses were not driving up to the factory gates in their cars and were likely not leading their fellow workers in rebellious ventures. If, perhaps, a few such women went to work in factories (other than Leftists intent on organizing them), it is unlikely they were so easily integrated into their networks after a few jibes about them not belonging. Indeed, even when Betty continues to call Gladys “princess” in a mocking tone, it is more a term of affection than derision.

It is also unlikely Rosedale women were the leaders of workplace organizing. True, Gladys’ attempt to confront sexual harassment may have implied that she had the *luxury* of speaking up; other women felt they did not since they needed their jobs. Nonetheless, Gladys is always the one who provides courage and leadership on workplace issues. As Wendy Cuthbertson’s book documents, World War II was a time of immense union organizing,<sup>20</sup> but in *Bomb Girls* there is none: not a mention of unions, grievance committees, nothing. In many factories like this one, organizing was done from the bottom up as well as top down, and many working-class women welcomed unions as they seemed to offer at least a rhetoric of democracy, as well as the promise of opportunity and equal pay, even if unions did not always deliver in practice. A Canadian Norma Rae, however, is conspicuously absent from *Bomb Girls*.

Despite the emphasis on women’s individual rebellions, there is little *class* conflict. Gender and ethnic divisions are recognized, but less so the tensions that inevitably emerge from work processes and conditions and the divergent interests of workers and managers/owners – thus contradicting what we know about the wartime workplace. Class conflict becomes reduced to an individual story of Gladys bucking her parents to enjoy the company of “real” working-class women as opposed to the false society ones she is running away from:

19. BG, Series 1, Episode 3.

20. Wendy Cuthbertson, *Labour Goes to War: the CIO and the Construction of a New Social Order, 1939–1945* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

"I've never felt more alive," she tells James about her factory work.<sup>21</sup> Well, as long as you don't lose your scalp. This romanticization of "real" factory labour is never really interrogated, although the writers may have been subtly critical of Gladys since she was also unable to completely leave her fashionable lifestyle, clothes, and contacts behind. Class as a category thus becomes atomized and individualized, obscuring the inflexibility of class structures as well as the collective agency of working-class women.

The concentration on Gladys' heroism persists in the special two-hour movie, which ended the series. She has been recruited to high-level spying by the smooth and unctuous British character, Clifford Perry, her lover for a short time. It is Gladys the undercover spy who saves Marco's job and reputation by revealing it was not really the state that was responsible for his father's internment but his jealous Italian neighbour who falsely informed on him. The state, conveniently, is let off the hook! In the movie, Perry is dispatched early on by an assassin's bullet, but Gladys avenges his death by rooting out the Nazi saboteurs in the factory, with the aid of her plucky working-class friends and her new lover, a Jewish man (anti-Semitism, seemingly not covered in the initial series, is featured more here). Sadly, it seems the factory story was not enough: dramatic (and frankly outlandish) storylines, with exploding pens and sinister spies, had to be added.

As the series progresses, a liberal optimism, not just about class, but about Canadian society as a whole, becomes more and more visible. Whatever the critiques are of class prejudice, racism, ethnocentrism, or homophobia, most characters come to embrace liberal enlightenment. Betty initially disliked Reggie; the subtle message is that she could not accept a Black co-worker. But Betty changes her mind and discards her prejudice after working with her. Coming from Nova Scotia, Reggie cannot find decent housing; racial discrimination is clearly at work, but Lorna takes her in as a boarder, becoming her surrogate mother. Near the end of the series, both Black and white women from the factory are shown doing volunteer work at the hospital. Yet, Dionne Brand's work suggests that Black women remained "apart" in wartime factories; they were given "dirtier" work, and some white women refused to share locker rooms with them.

Marco tells us repeatedly that he is treated like a "dog" because he is Italian, but he finds tolerance through Vera's love and Gladys' loyalty, and he is redeemed in the last episode as he stands, glorious in his uniform, accepted into the army (at least, realistically, his father stayed angry at him for enlisting). Vera is known to everyone as a "patriotute," but most of the women accept her for her generosity – and she does play something of the "whore with heart of gold." Even the self-described "gimp," Lorna's disabled husband, discards his anti-war cynicism and is literally *walking again* at the end, due to the modern medical intervention of the Indian doctor who Lorna invites to dinner

21. BG, Series 1, Episode 1.

with her daughter. Racism too is thus conquered. Class and ethnic conflict, in other words, are tied up and resolved: the war apparently dealt a death blow to divisions in Canadian society, not the argument suggested in Carmela Patrias' book.<sup>22</sup> Canadian multicultural tolerance appears to emerge organically, long before the word was coined in the 1960s. Were these tidy resolutions really necessary? After all, other Canadian television dramas have eschewed such neat, reassuring liberal solutions and have been stronger for their realism.

Linked to this liberal optimism and the obscuring of class is the overarching emphasis on individualism. Certainly, we can't deny that some women used the unusual circumstances of war to enlist, find new jobs, earn a better living, and flee confining families, but we also know there were limitations to their social transformation. *Bomb Girls* characters are most often altered in individual ways: like Hollywood movies that focused sympathetically on the underdog or the "little guy," the story converts "economic, sociological and political dilemmas into personal melodramas."<sup>23</sup> Lorna learns how to reconnect with her husband; Kate's singing liberates her from her repressive religious background; Betty finds love with a lesbian in the CWACs; and Vera finds self and social respect by joining the CWACs.

Could the production have been sold to Global without this liberal optimism and without an attractive, heroic "Rosedale girl" as the leading lady? The realities of producing and funding such a series in the small Canadian market need to be acknowledged. Moreover, it is understandably difficult to challenge the dominant ideologies of class and gender on prime-time TV. There is merit to the claim that historical authenticity was a concern for the producers, and some of the stories told, about internment, industrial accidents, unequal pay, harassment, and especially women's desire for economic independence, bear a strong resemblance to what might have happened in the past. Sadly, it is primarily the wartime setting that allowed these stories of factory women to be told; losing one scalp in an accident might otherwise appear too mundanely violent for viewers. War provided the licence for writers to present working women in ways that clearly appealed to a loyal audience interested in the interconnected drama of romance, female friendships, and work.

However limited its understanding of class relations, we need more mass media efforts like *Bomb Girls*: they allow us to encourage our students to think about the relationship between mass media, representation and working women, to raise questions about the agency of working women, and perhaps eventually tell different stories about the past.

22. Carmela Patrias, *Jobs and Justice: Fighting Discrimination in Wartime Canada, 1939–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

23. Robert Ray quoted in Carol Quirke, *Eyes on Labor: News Photography and America's Working Class* (Oxford: New York, 2012), 5.