
UNEXPECTED:

Women, Sources, and Histories

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Teaching students about history this past academic year, we encountered salient historical questions that made me, as our teaching should, reflect on our own practice as researchers, intellectuals, activists, and historical actors. Those questions ranged from the esoteric (“What is history? What is a fact?”) to the practical (“What is an archive? Where does one find historical material?”). Each step of the way, I encouraged a consciousness of historical practice. As I read and contemplated Gerda Lerner’s assessment of women’s history over the last thirty years, a recurring question was, “Where do we look for history?” Working in African American women’s history, it is a challenging question with some unexpected answers, but at its most basic, histories of marginalized groups are often found where we least expect to find them.

As Lerner notes, her general impressions of the direction that women’s history has taken in the years since she and other scholars pioneered the field are based on three main areas: dissertation abstracts, monograph prizes, and book reviews. She gauges the relative acceptance of women’s history within the discipline based on books recognized by the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, the Bancroft Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize. Finally, Lerner surveyed books reviewed in the *Journal of American History* (JAH) and dissertation abstracts for content pertaining to women’s history. Advances in these areas do, indeed, indicate the movement of women’s history from a peripheral place in the discipline to, at least, closer to the center in significant ways in the last thirty years.

I want to take up four observations Lerner makes in her review: the concern that women’s history is tending to focus on prominent women to the neglect of others less prominent; the availability of sources for women’s history; what I interpret as an interdisciplinary or postmodern skepticism; and issues of a proliferation of research on particular themes over others. I would contend that in this new era of women’s history we need to look for history in unexpected places. I mean this in two senses: one, literally thinking about where we find historical documents pertaining to women’s history or what we might categorize as historical documents of women’s history, and two, locating women’s history in interdisciplinarity. In other words, perhaps it is time we looked outside the field and its organizations for additional places for acceptance of women’s history. If anything, the

field and its gatekeepers would do well to recognize the ways in which attention to gender, women's reconfiguring of the political landscape, and the contributions of women of color have changed historical practice for the better. Granted, there is much work to be done in putting our own house in order in terms of critique, but seeking out history in unexpected places might be necessarily and simultaneously internal and external critical practice.

I want to take as my example African American women's history. The contributions of scholars working in African American women's history are substantial and go a long way in helping us see how an intersectional approach to history and women's experiences can illuminate categories heretofore thought invisible (for example, whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and myriad class positions). However, I was concerned with Lerner's separation (segregation?) of African American women's history into a distinct category that we might all do well to emulate. It might seem odd, as a practitioner of African-American women's history, to stake out this position, but I view it akin to "positive stereotypes"—if we only heap on and take praise, where is the room for improvement and innovation?

In accounting for the prevalence of biographies, Lerner notes that "In the case of these biographies [on Mary Church Terrell and Meta Fuller], it is obvious that the availability of sources is not an issue that determines the selection of subjects; rather it seems to be the popularity of the persons." For those concerned with African American women's history—histories on any marginalized group—we might consider the extent of this statement: are the archival sources, indeed, readily available? Do we only write about "popular" African American women? The latter may indeed be part of the truth. But then we might consider whether literature scholars lament the voluminous work on Shakespeare or if historians wish that someone would write about something other than World War II? (True, some traditionalists in literature abhor the proliferation of work on African American women writers—for example, Toni Morrison—but that sentiment merely underscores their racism and sexism).

Even when women are well-known, we can still lack a critical mass of extensive work that addresses the many aspects of their lives and contributions. In terms of popular African-American women figures for historical consideration, Florynce Kennedy, the fiery and notable black feminist who penned one of the first books to interrogate the role of race in abortion, has yet to be the subject of a full-length biography.¹ She is, in fact, one of the most well-known second wave black feminists of the era—her work resonated with both white and black feminists who were organizing separately during the women's liberation movement. Despite this notori-

ety, Sherie Williams Randolph is currently writing what will be, to my knowledge, the first extensive work on Kennedy's life and political outlook.²

We might also reflect on the lack of a biography on playwright Lorraine Hansberry and access to archival materials. Where are the articles and monographs on Hansberry's contributions to black political and feminist thought? To my limited knowledge, Margaret Wilkerson is the only scholar or writer with access to Hansberry's closely guarded archives. So, less than an attempt to rush what is sure to be Wilkerson's illuminating and valuable work, my concern is centered more on access to archives and how, in fact, gatekeepers restrict research and publication on figures—popular or unknown/unsung—who would add entirely new dimensions to women's history. If one obstacle to generating new biographies or other works on prominent and not-so-prominent figures is access to archival materials, perhaps we should take a new look at how we teach research methods to graduate students who, frankly, are entering a new age of research methods dramatically affected by the internet and archives' abilities to pick and choose which of their holdings are accessible online.

Moreover, how do we inform our own research and that of graduate students' taking into consideration disparities in how the documents, diaries, correspondence, organizational records, and other materials are treated and devalued in some archival situations? Taking as an example research and access to materials on black feminist organizations for my book *Living for the Revolution*, there are a range of experiences in the availability of sources that speak to the kinds of histories produced about marginalized groups of women.³ Archival materials belonging to women who founded black feminist organizations from 1968 to 1980 were, indeed, located in unexpected places—underneath beds, in attics, stored in garage crawlspaces. In one interview, Aileen Hernandez (former president of the National Organization for Women, following Betty Friedan, and co-founder of Black Women Organized for Action), commented offhandedly that she might have a few organizational flyers she could send me as part of my research. What came in the post was a substantial box of periodical articles, a complete set of newsletters from the duration of the BWOA's existence, chapbooks from the organization's brief foray into independent publishing, and minutes from most of the organization's membership meetings. To say that these documents constituted the entirety of the known archives of the BWOA would be an understatement. Hernandez's contribution to my project, and that of other scholars studying black feminist organizations in history and sociology, continues to be invaluable. If we are to expand women's history beyond prominent black women, we must seek new historical spaces and ask keener questions of women who modestly continue to appraise their historical experiences.

We also need to think about how marginalized groups' archival legacies are treated. At one archive, when asked for access to the papers of a black feminist activist in a Midwestern archive, a library assistant wheeled up from the basement a cart holding seven boxes of uncatalogued documents. When asked about photocopy facilities, I was told that if there were multiple copies of documents, I could just take what I wanted! Admittedly, some variation of this activist's papers were held by another archive, but to my knowledge, this was the historical legacy of the sole national black feminist organization in the area. The greater point here—aside from my dubious luck in securing these papers—is that we cannot expect histories of little-known women if this is the consideration given to the physical manifestations of their lives.

What is our responsibility in excavating and safeguarding the raw material of unexpected women's history? How do we look at unlikely materials in ways that yield their potential as significant contributions to women's history? In addition to allowing the material to inform historical inquiry is the aspect of preservation. Seeing that the original black feminist organizations' materials that have come into my possession make it into either an historical, educational, or activist institution's holdings or become a part of a digital archive, are just as much a part of encouraging the growth of women's history as writing about the materials.

In another mode of expansion, I want to explore what I interpret to be a degree of interdisciplinary anxiety in Gerda Lerner's note that as women's history ventures off into many directions, the field is "lacking, or perhaps rejecting, coherent conceptual frameworks." Does this perceived lack or rejection stem from the growth of interest in historical research methods in literature and the social sciences, and, concurrently, historians' adoption of research methods from fields other than history? Or is this a worry about the impact of postmodernism on history?

If it is the latter, I would note the complicated challenges the linguistic turn offers to historical concepts. As Arif Dirlik reflects on the subject, "These tendencies to postmodernity in history were reinforced by the appearance and diffusion of poststructuralism, resulting in a questioning of all the working concepts of the historian from 'space' and 'time' to 'subject,' 'context,' and 'event'. . . . The proliferating claims on the past of new social constituencies, already an important moment in the creation of the new social history, has gained momentum since the 1980s as the assertion of diasporic identities has further scrambled notions of what is a proper unit of historical analysis."⁴ The widening of concepts and opening of the field to diasporic identities is, as Lerner remarks, one of the attendant contributions of women's history in complicating the concept "woman" as it is shaped by race, class, and sexuality. This deconstruction, and recon-

struction, of woman or women is both informed by and influenced by interdisciplinary methods and postmodern thought.

The final concern I would take up is Lerner's finding on trends in research. Lerner found, in her review of recent women's history publishing, a wealth of scholarship on representation, identity, and culture, but a lack of attention to women's social, political, and organizational history. One explanation might be recalling the realities of publishing as a business more interested in marketing hot, but rigorous topics than attention to the state of the field over time. For myriad reasons, it is difficult to ascertain from completed dissertations and book awards what might still be in the pipeline.

Also, if the interdisciplinary and poststructuralist turns have indeed affected women's history, I would say they offer a way for us to rethink the dichotomy Lerner poses in her findings: either representation/identity/culture or social/political/organizational history. It is, I would maintain, impossible to oppose these works in women's history: the social, political, and organizational histories of women shape their representations, identities, and cultures—and vice versa.

In her work on the Tulsa Race Riots, Kimberly Ellis takes as her starting point the organizations and institutions that made Black Tulsa prosperous, but also a target for racist repression in the 1920s.⁵ Her use of Ida B. Wells-Barnett's ideas on self-defense as promulgated in black communities is but one example of her attention to the social, political, and organizational history of a community that relied in great part on the actions of women. Whether active political actors or the symbols that ignited racist violence, women were integral to history on many levels. Yet, Ellis also tackles questions of identity, culture, and representation as they connect to the social, political, and organizational. In telling the history of women in Tulsa during this volatile period, it would be impossible and undesirable to dichotomize those experiences.

A prime example of casting a wider net across disciplines is the recent publication of Benita Roth's comparative organizational history, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). Although Roth's book offers innovative and compelling theoretical contributions to the literature on social movements, to cast it solely as sociological would cheat women's history out of one of the most dynamic and necessary contributions to women's movement social history (organizational and cultural) to come along in the last twenty years. Moreover, it would behoove women's historians to make it impossible to analyze representation without attention to the organizational conditions that foster particular types of representations and organizational responses to those representations

and new identities emerging from them. In particular, if we are to continue on a path of an inclusive women's history, we might need to rethink the disciplinary boundaries we establish and how they prevent us from viewing women's history as a holistic movement across disciplines. Perhaps it is the interdisciplinarian's blind-spot, but I do not see the increase in particular types of women's history—especially those neglected before now—as necessarily meaning the death knell for other types of history that continue to shape our present circumstances.

The goal for the future of women's history appears to be how to secure, as Lerner notes, more of "the space where we rightfully belong." This is, then, a matter of external and internal challenge: continuing to push the boundaries of the field and its institutions that award fellowships, book awards, book contracts, and teaching positions, but also challenging ourselves on the ways in which we limit ourselves to particular paradigms of what women's history should be. The boundary between an all-encompassing vision of the field's future and unnecessarily limiting ourselves to traditional venues of acceptance is a fine one. Ensuring that our visions do not limit us remains a constant obligation . . . and privilege.

NOTES

¹Florynce Kennedy and Diane Schurder, *Abortion Rap* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971).

²Sherie Williams Randolph, "Florynce 'Flo' Kennedy and Black Feminist Politics in Postwar America" (paper presented at "Black Feminisms," The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 12 March 2004).

³Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2005).

⁴Arif Dirlik, "Whither History? Encounters with Historicism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism," *Futures* (February 2002) 34, no. 1: 75–90.

⁵Kimberly Ellis, "Mary Parrish, Don't You Weep!: African American Women and the Tulsa Race Riot, War and Massacre of 1921" (unpublished paper in author's possession).