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Reflections on Making Women's Histories Beyond National Perspectives

Pamela S. Nadell, PhD, American University

Before Brigham Young University's Third Annual Women's Studies Conference, I went back and re-read the introductions I wrote for two of my edited books: *American Jewish Women's History* (New York University Press, 2003) and *Making Women's Histories: Beyond National Perspectives* (co-edited with Kate Haulman, New York University Press, 2013). These books were published a decade apart. To my chagrin, I realized that I should have re-read the introduction to *American Jewish Women's History* before writing the one for *Making Women's Histories*. Only after I re-read my opening remarks side by side did I discover that I had inserted the very same quotation by Gerda Lerner into the opening paragraph of both books. In Lerner's autobiographical essay in *Voices of Women Historians: The Personal, the Political, the Professional*, she reflected: "My commitment to women's history came out of my life, not out of my head."¹ I keep turning to this particular quotation and turning it over because it holds the key to my own making of women's histories. In fact, I suspect that Lerner's words speak not only to me but also to many who are deeply engaged in the writing and teaching of women's and gender studies.

For this conference, with its theme of *Women, Race, and Ethnicity*, I placed these two books as my bookends for my personal project of making women's histories. In *American Jewish Women's History* I assembled some of the best essays and book chapters, written up to that time, on Jewish women. They explore Jewish women as daughters, wives, and mothers; students and teachers; workers and entrepreneurs. The chapters in this book convey the remarkable energy and diversity of Jewish women across 350 years of the American Jewish experience as well as the state of scholarship in this field in 2003.

In my other bookend, *Making Women's Histories: Beyond National Perspectives*, Kate Haulman and I gathered new essays. When read together, they demonstrate that

those writing women's histories hoped their works would advance women's status at their moments in time and into the future.

If I think of the writing of histories as a series of circles, some of which overlap, others of which are concentric, American Jewish women's history is a tiny circle circumscribed within the great circles of American history, U.S. women's history, American Jewish history, and world Jewish history. In American history, it lies contiguous to circles of African-American women's history (much larger), Latina history (also larger), and Irish-American women's history (likely smaller). By contrast, *Making Women's Histories* sits in a vast circle. Parts of it intersect with large national narratives like those of China, Egypt, India, and Russia. But beyond that, the book finds a place within the growing and potentially outsized circle of transnational history.

How did I come to the making of *American Jewish Women's History*? As is well known, before the 1970s, readers of history "encountered a world of 'significant knowledge,' in which women seemed not to exist."²

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In the next decade, as many began writing and teaching women's history—really histories, although this was not then widely acknowledged—some began asking, "Why was the history of the Jewish woman yet to be written?"³ In fact, earlier in the twentieth century, a few women had written such histories. These pioneers—females, of course—dared to assert, in a less hospitable climate, that America's Jewish women had a history of their own. But these scholars were dismissed, ignored,

or trivialized by male professors who then, from their prestigious positions in rabbinical seminaries and occasionally in the American academy, were the gatekeepers to the writing of Jewish history.⁴

In the 1970s and 1980s, to the new, for want of a better word, mainstream women's historians just then claiming their places in this profession, Jewish women, did not seem a likely subject for study. That holds true, even though a surprising number of these scholars came from Jewish backgrounds.⁵

Even into the early 1990s, as the initial spurt of writing U.S. women's history gave way to the first syntheses of this scholarship, Jewish women remained subsumed under the category of white—and thus largely privileged—women. In the first edition of the widely taught *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, Jewish women were invisible. Multiculturalism did not then embrace this group. The reader included no article on American Jewish women, but two references to Jews anywhere in the text, and none to American Jewish women in the index. When Jewish women did surface in survey histories of American women, they appeared fleetingly, as immigrant girls striking for better wages in the garment industry or as the victims of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.⁶

By the end of the decade, however, historians of American women conceded the need for “a more complex approach to women’s experiences.” They came to recognize that “not all white women’s histories can be categorized under one label.” Some explicitly called “to diversify our coverage of Jewish American women.”⁷ As they did, they drew upon burgeoning scholarship that was capped, in 1997, by the celebrated publication of *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by the late Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore. [I was privileged to be a member of its editorial advisory board.]⁸

Encyclopedias usually synthesize existing scholarship. This one did not because so much of this scholarship had not yet been written. In over 1700 pages, and now available on the web as part of the encyclopedia of Jewish women around the world at the Jewish Women’s Archive (www.jwa.org), this encyclopedia made history even as it was about the making of American Jewish women’s history.

In articles about both individuals and broad topics, like Jewish women and assimilation and even an entry on Jewish female scholars of women’s studies, this encyclopedia conveyed sweeping new knowledge about nearly 350 years of Jewish women’s experiences in America. This encyclopedia and my reader *American Jewish Women’s History*, which followed, showcased American Jewish women cooking in their kitchens and praying in the women’s balconies of their synagogues. They scribbled at their writing tables and sold harnesses from behind the counters of their general stores. Some of them hunched over sewing machines until their aching fingers bled; others danced in front of the mirror. American Jewish women founded benevolent associations, orphanages, Sunday schools, and Zionist organizations. They joined together, sometimes just with Jewish women, sometimes also with Gentile women, to help others, especially women and children, at home and abroad. Jewish women embraced political crusades and wrote about their interior lives. They were stereotyped as overbearing, self-sacrificing Jewish mothers—How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? “None, I’ll sit in the dark”—and as spoiled, materialistic Jewish American princesses whose favorite words were “Charge it.” Incidentally Jewish men created and popularized these stereotypes as anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell explains in *Fighting to Become Americans*.⁹ Jewish women also observed Sabbaths and holidays and eventually so dramatically reconfigured their places in Jewish religious life that, by the last quarter of the twentieth century, some had crashed the gender barrier to religious leadership and become rabbis.

This latter struggle is particularly pertinent to the topic of making women’s histories, as I discovered in writing *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women’s Ordination, 1889-1985*. There I showed that the women who would have been rabbis, if women then could have been rabbis, brought forward women of the Jewish past, like the judge Deborah and the prophetess Huldah, to claim that, because Jewish tradition historically had women as religious leaders, nothing in that tradition prohibited modern Jewish women from becoming rabbis.¹⁰

At the core of *American Jewish Women's History* lies the question: What connects Abigaill Levy Franks, the great letter writer of colonial Jewry, who so bemoaned the aridity of her synagogue services that she heartily wished “a Calvin or a Luther would arise amongst us”¹¹ with the young Jewish women of the 1960s who headed South to work in the Civil Rights Movement?¹² *American Jewish Women's History* argues that they all lived lives at the intersections not only of their particular times and places, but also within their variegated and braided identities as women, as Jews, and as Americans. Perhaps the Jewish poet Muriel Rukeyser expressed this best when she penned: “To live as a poet, woman, American, and Jew—this chalks in my position.”¹³ So too, the American Jewish women we historians have chalked into history’s spaces did so as historical actors living out their lives as women, as Americans, and as Jews.

However, with the publication of *Making Women's Histories*, I purposefully left America’s Jewish women behind, at least for the moment. I came to conceive of *Making Women's Histories* during the 2008 conference “‘With Vision Flying’: New Perspectives on Women’s and Gender History,” which I organized at American University.¹⁴ That conference featured new women’s and gender historical scholarship primarily by AU faculty and alumni. Over the course of a day and a half, a striking thematic unity came to the fore. Presentation after presentation,

unexpectedly, at least to me, demonstrated that parallel circumstances had sparked the writing of women’s and gender history in different times and places.

Earlier I had found the women who would have been rabbis repeatedly turning, in their essays, speeches, and even rabbinical theses, to Jewish women of the past to support their ambitions to expand their roles in their

I found [women] turning [to] women of the past to support their ambitions to expand their roles in their present.

present. During “‘With Vision Flying,’” I heard about others employing women’s histories to advance women’s status at other places and moments in time. It became evident that around the world, women and men had long used the project of the making of the women’s histories as one of the keys to advancing women in society.

Making Women's Histories: Beyond National Perspectives was the result. In ten chapters (not conference papers, but rather new work especially commissioned for this volume), scholars stand atop various historiographic vantage points—Tsarist Russia, the British empire in Egypt and India, Qing-dynasty China, the U.S. roiling through the 1960s. From these and other peaks they gaze out at the world around them reflecting upon the historical circumstances that gave rise to the writing of women’s histories in recent and distant pasts. *Making Women's Histories’* authors convey their personal discoveries of women’s history and the accomplishments of women’s and gender history within their specific fields. They examine the multiple turns the field has taken from women’s history to gender history, from

gender history to cultural studies, from cultural studies to transnational history.¹⁵ They consider spin-offs into intersecting fields, like the study of sexualities and of masculinities. They know that place and location do matter, that they determine the questions historians ask and answer. Some authors discovered precursors to the contemporary professionalized field of women's history; others imagine new directions the field will take in the years ahead.

Making Women's Histories also joins the large circle of conversation currently underway in the historical profession about globalizing historiography. As historians have grown increasingly critical of the limitations of the nation and have called upon scholars to write history in transnational and intercultural global contexts, this book brings transnational historical themes to the fore. While the individual chapters of *Making Women's Histories* (with a few important exceptions, like those of Claire Robertson which ranges widely across the history of women in Africa and Jocelyn Olcott on feminist history) are not internally transnational, when read together, they generate striking comparisons and contrasts.

So what does *Making Women's Histories* argue? First, no matter where, no matter when, whether in the twenty-first century or in the eighteenth, writing women's history was a political and politicized project. This historiography—whether written by professional historians or, as so often before the 1970s, by civil servants and politically-engaged women and men—was meant to help propel women forward in their societies.

Making Women's Histories opens by reminding us that 1960s feminism engendered an historical consciousness that led to the birth of an entire academic field of inquiry, one that then seemed utterly new. As Barbara Engel, a pioneer in Russian women's history, reflects: "women's history seemed part of a movement that might transform the world we knew."¹⁶ Engel, Robertson, and Kathy Peiss, an historian of American women, confess that their scholarship came out of their personal encounters with the political. As Peiss writes: "This was heritage that supported and legitimized a social movement."¹⁷ Their research and writing represented their personal contributions to the making of second-wave feminism.

That second-wave feminism pushed women out of the shadows and into history's spotlight, just as it was propelling women forward in so many other spheres, should not be surprising. But what was unanticipated is that there were similar phenomena in earlier eras. For example, in *Making Women's Histories* Arianne Chernock reports on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century histories of British "women worthies"—that is studies of female queens, warriors, saints, and even villains, whose lives were so exceptional, that, despite being women, they left their imprint on the past.¹⁸

These books too became key sites for advancing debates over women's rights. When these old histories pointed, for example, to Mary Sydney, the Countess of Pembroke until her death in 1621, and her mastery of the Hebrew language, they

provided evidence for contemporaneous discussions over women's capacity to learn, to do, and to exercise civic and political rights. These histories put forward these exceptional women as role models capable of removing from society "that vulgar prejudice of the supposed incapacity of the female sex."¹⁹ Chernock concludes that those writing great women into the past in earlier eras and the late-twentieth-century professional historians of women and gender equally knew that "to have the courage to act in the present, women needed to know that they were not alone in history."²⁰

Even as women's and gender history engages the past, informs the present, and enters into the future, this scholarship is also enmeshed within a tangle of transnational debates over the meanings and uses of modernity, colonialism and anti-colonialism, the nation and nationalism.

For example, if the nation was to become modern, its women had to live modern lives, and producing women's histories was harnessed to this project. Modernity demanded change—education for girls and women everywhere, cleanliness and order in colonized households, new forms of medical care. Modernity also meant repudiating female traditions deemed anathema to Enlightenment ideals of rationality—footbinding in China, *sati* (the self-immolation of a widow on her

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husband's funeral pyre) in India, the harem in Egypt. Both colonialists and nationalists critiqued these behaviors for yoking women to the past and hence limiting the nation, preventing it from taking its proper place in the modern world order. For colonizers, the necessity of such reforms justified their imperial "gendered civilizing mission."²¹ But anti-colonialists thought they should be the ones to emancipate their nation's women. If they, rather than the colonials or the imperial state would take charge of "liberating" women, they could

advance their ultimate aim of freeing the nation. Both sides used an emerging literature on women's history for their explicitly political purposes.

Given my making of *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, I should not have been surprised by the deeply political and politicized nature of making women's histories. As noted already, every single one of the pioneers I unearthed for that book and so many of those advocating for women's ordination in Judaism's century-long debate had used the history of Jewish women in the past. Like those elsewhere who had pointed to the Countess of Pembroke, these advocating for women's rabbinic ordination brought forth a parade of Jewish women from biblical times onward. Champions of women rabbis insisted that these historical figures, with

their learning, knowledge, and leadership, substantiated that Jewish tradition, even if it had never before called a woman rabbi, had indeed permitted women to take on rabbinical roles. This history justified the claims of the women who would have been rabbis. It promised that, if they became rabbis, they would uphold the traditions of the Jewish past, not overthrow them.

Making Women's Histories also affirms the political nature of writing women's histories. The development of women's history and its historiographies—the books and articles historians, whether scholars or amateurs, have produced—has long contributed to the work of advancing the status of women in society. It is this political project that bridges my two bookends. One is about a particular small ethnic/religious group, the other about writing women's histories broadly across time and space. Yet, in the end, these bookends, like the enormous circle of historiography in women's and gender history, sustain the truism that all history is politics. After all, we historians know that “remembering is not,” and never has been, “a neutral act.”²²

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