

# Women's Studies in Focus

## Women's History and Women's Studies: Teaching, Research and Theory

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### INTRODUCTION

This special issue on women's history is an exciting development for *Atlantis*. For many women's historians, however, it may be the first issue they have read in many years, or for some younger scholars, the first time they have ever looked at the journal. While *Atlantis* has recently published some women's history articles, it was mainly in the 1970s and early 1980s that it existed as an important venue for publishing women's history. After this period the journal tended to focus primarily on other forms of feminist scholarship and creative work. This pattern is not unique to *Atlantis* but reflects the changing relationship between women's studies and women's history in Canada. As two scholars trained in women's history, one of whom teaches in a women's studies department and increasingly defines herself in that context, while the other remains within history with only very occasional forays into women's studies, we wanted to explore this relationship. Thus, we organized a roundtable on the subject (co-sponsored by the Canadian Historical Association and the Canadian Women's Studies Association), which was held at the Congress of Social Sciences and Humanities in Sherbrooke, Québec, in June 1999. The papers presented at the roundtable are published here, as part of *Atlantis*'s regular feature on Women's Studies in Focus.

In the late 1960s and 1970s there were certainly some women's historians who distanced themselves from women's studies, and indeed from feminism. Many others, however, were strongly influenced by the women's movement and organized both women's studies and women's history courses in universities and colleges across

Canada. Women's historians were active in the organization and early years of the development of the Canadian Women's Studies Association and contributed to making women's history an important component of the newly developing field of women's studies (Gorham 1997; Strong-Boag 2000; Van Kirk 1999). When organizing the roundtable, we hoped to include the perspectives of women's historians who had been active in the early years, but those more senior scholars we approached were not able to participate. Consequently, the following articles focus on the current relationship between women's history and women's studies, a relationship that remains important, but is both less close and more complex than it once was.

Our contributors range from established scholars and administrators of women's studies programs to graduate students in women's studies or history departments. Some of the contributors focus on the relationship between the two disciplines in the context of teaching, while others explore issues of theory and research. The contributors do not necessarily agree regarding problems and possibilities in the current relationship between women's history and women's studies, but certain commonalities among the articles are striking. These are by no means the only perspectives on this topic, which deserves more extensive study in terms of both current and past developments. Nonetheless, the authors raise important questions about relations between the two sister disciplines, and suggest useful and thought-provoking directions forward.

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### **BRIDGING THE GAP: WOMEN'S STUDIES, WOMEN'S HISTORY, GENDER HISTORY, AND LOST SUBJECTS**

Over the past twenty years both women's studies and women's history have established themselves as recognized disciplines and women's historians have successfully retrieved and recovered women from historical obscurity. Unfortunately, while white Canadian women's histories have been documented in substantial ways, black Canadian women and other women of colour have not had this luxury. The fact that white women's experiences tend to remain paramount in both women's history and women's studies is especially frustrating in the context of women's studies, which claims inclusiveness in terms of acknowledging and supporting women's diversity. More recently, many feminist scholars have shifted to gender history and post-structuralist analysis. In my view, the current engagement with language and discourse has the potential to exclude or delegitimize the use of methodological tools and approaches useful in exploring the lives of and histories of non-white women. Thus women's studies and gender history with their focus on discourse/language and women's history with its emphasis primarily on white women's experiences continue to perpetuate white female supremacy, confining non-white women to the margins of historical scholarship (Dubinsky and Marks 1996; Iacovetta and Kealey 1996; Sangster 1995).

Another troubling trend is the current preoccupation with "whiteness" in gender history studies (Bederman 1995). While no one can deny the significance of scrutinizing the unmarked, neutral, and structural advantage of "whiteness," the possibility exists of reaffirming its dominance while attempting to disrupt it as a category. This focus on white women and "whiteness" may further marginalize historical work on black women. Equally disconcerting is the failure of women's studies scholars and women's historians to take

seriously criticisms made by women of colour regarding the lack of theorizing of race and racism in their respective disciplines. While a proliferation of research particularly in women's studies shows how race intersects with gender and class in shaping the lives of women, scholars still have difficulties explaining how these social relations interrelate simultaneously. Women's historians may mention - mostly in the introduction of texts, anthologies, or edited collections - how crucial it is to interrogate multiple identities such as race, class, and gender but they rarely follow through with analyses that demonstrate this. Gender historians also emphasize the importance of the triad of identities; in practice, however, they privilege one variable, namely gender, which then operates to subsume other social relations. If gender history is supposed to analyze the formation of social relations and the positions of men and women, this goal has yet to be realized as it relates to those of us who are non-white. Gender historians who draw on post-structuralist theories need to develop a framework for examining the practices that produce unequal power relations among white and non-white women.

As a graduate student with a history background who is currently pursuing a PhD in women's studies, my struggle centres around using the approaches offered by women's history and gender history in my research on black nurses. My main concern is that neither gender nor women's history as they have developed in Canada adequately theorize the intersections of race, gender, and, class (particularly race) which is the central theoretical framework I use in my work. My foremost aim has always been to recover and document the lived experiences of women who have never been deemed "worthy" of feminist historical inquiry and whose lives have been circumscribed by other social identities besides gender. Despite their inadequacies, women's and gender history do offer specific ways of theorizing that are relevant to my research. While I am critical of women's history for its lack of race analysis, its commitment to reclaiming and theorizing women's experience is useful for and affirming of my own research approach. Gender history also has its benefits, but I find it more difficult to incorporate the newer theories on language and discourse in my analysis.

How, then, have current theoretical debates affected my research on black nurses? What I find disconcerting is that during the period when white women's experiences were being extensively documented there was little debate about whether it was possible to recover "real," "knowable" experiences. Now that black Canadian women's histories are in the process of being discovered and written about, the very concept of experience has come under intense critique. Gender historians assert that women's subjectivities are multiple, malleable, and contradictory. As a result, it is impossible to generalize or make universalist claims about a particular group of women. Ironically, it was women of colour who first introduced the idea of multiple subjectivities, by pointing out the impact of race, class, and gender as defining forces in women's lives. However, gender historians' emphasis on fragmented subjects and multiple identities obscures and makes politically difficult the possibility of naming racism as a shared experience among black nurses even when there are discernable patterns of racism in their testimonies. While I recognize that there are multiple experiences, black women's lives were nonetheless shaped by histories of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and migration which affected how they were constructed, perceived, and inscribed within nursing. An example from my research serves as a concrete illustration of the potential impact of these debates.

Orphelia Bennett migrated to Canada in 1955 from Jamaica where she trained at the University of the West Indies as an RN for three years and also obtained a Midwifery Certificate. Her first application to work in Canada was rejected by Immigration. She then applied directly to the Toronto General Hospital where, unlike other Caribbean nurses, her qualifications as an RN were recognized. Bennett spent three weeks at Toronto General because, in her words, "one little gal (white) that just finished nursing started bossing me around, she had no orientation. She just finished and wasn't even registered yet. We were just going around, she kept telling me that I have to move the patient, to do this and to do that. It was on a Sunday, and on the Monday, I didn't return." Bennett did not characterize the white nurse's behaviour as racist. Her response was similar to that of other nurses who immigrated during the early

1950s and 1960s, who tended to characterize tensions with white nurses and the frequent job changes they endured as a result in terms of education, personality, and experience. Black nurses employed in the 1970s and 1980s, when racism was more politicized, were much more likely to identify these strained relations as the direct result of racism. The challenge then is whether to draw on gender or women's history to explain Bennett's response.

Gender historians, influenced by post-structuralism, would pay less attention to who Bennett is and more on decoding language and interpreting the discourses in nursing and the social context of the 1950s that shaped how she interpreted her interaction with her colleague. Even though this incident had real consequences for Bennett, who was forced to relinquish her position at the Toronto General Hospital, post-structuralist gender historians would argue that "it is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experiences" (Scott 1991, 779). By focusing on the historical processes that position subjects and subsequently produce and reproduce their experiences, these historians would analyze the institutional structures and the discourse employed in constructing "blackness" and how these influenced the subordination of black women in nursing. Gender historians would also question whether it is possible for me as the researcher to identify this incident as racist, since Bennett did not draw on the discourse of racism. I would argue that language and discourse cannot be the only tools for interpreting black nurses' experience in the workplace, as they do not adequately explain the real, tangible effects of race and racism on these women's lives. This is where I believe women's history is useful, as it both recognizes the category of experience and acknowledges the structural and institutional racism that permeates the development of Canadian society.

How, then, can I explain Bennett's experience using the tools of women's history? Socialist feminist women's historians' emphasis on recognizing structures of domination and inequality is useful in exploring the experiences of nurses such as Bennett. Her experience could be examined in terms of how black nurses' entrance into the profession challenged the homogeneity and the hierarchy that once existed. Furthermore, women's

historians' analysis of power as historically specific allows me to probe how race complicated the hierarchy of nursing and the relations of power that existed among and between women. Thus the relationship between nurses is historically specific and depended on the political, economic, and social climate in which various groups of Caribbean women migrated. The absence of large numbers of black women in the nursing profession in this period is a possible explanation for Bennett's lack of awareness around racism, since racism may have been modified or repressed in this context. In the final analysis, women's historians are less likely to dismiss Bennett's particular experience, but would acknowledge it as part of women's experiences.

While I critique the inability of gender historians to explain fully Bennett's or similar experiences, this does not mean that gender history's analytical approach has nothing to offer. It has forced me to interrogate my sources in more complicated ways. Discourse analysis is also crucial for examining how black women are constructed in the workplace as "angry" or as "trouble makers." It is these racist discourses about "blackness" derived from the slave plantation that individuals draw on to produce what has become common sense notions about contemporary black womanhood. These persistent representations can help to explain why vocal black nurses are targeted and why some have been dismissed for challenging racism in the workplace. Furthermore, while I have fundamental problems with the assumption that "there is no experience outside of the ways language constructs it," the question of contestable subjectivities does allow for a more critical exploration of black nurses' diverse experiences. There are important similarities in the experiences of black nurses, but there is more than one story to tell, as they themselves differ by age, education, and training, the various islands from which they emigrated, and their migratory experiences.

Would this research be easier in a history or women's studies department? I think women's studies, with its emphasis on interdisciplinarity, offers more theoretical approaches from which to draw. At the same time, crossing disciplinary boundaries has its limitations. One difficulty I face is coming to terms with the critiques surrounding historical methodologies and practices as they affect my research. While I appreciate the theoretical

critiques offered by gender historians and women's studies, I am not ready to relinquish the tools offered by women's history. I will continue to use the concept of "experience," albeit in a more critical way, to validate the lives of women who contributed to the political economy of Canada.

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#### NO THEORY WILL SAVE US

Woman as a category of inquiry is limited. It is a fragment in a complex world. It is also a ghetto. It helps maintain its own marginality. One way in which it does so is by limiting its incursions into and critiques of dominant discourses within the contours of the woman question. Woman-centered inquiry is a constraint representing itself as freedom. Simply by its constant reiteration it reinforces the very category it deems oppressive. We need to scrutinize the underlying assumptions and drives of woman-centered inquiry. Otherwise we reinforce and reiterate the very essentialisms and oppressions that we are attempting to deconstruct as well as further entrenching existing structures, systems, and relations of power.

I want to raise questions about the underlying assumptions and drives which inform this inquiry and its practices in general. The comments do not reflect the work of a select few but rather are the threads that inform our practice as well as weave through the canon of woman-

centered inquiry produced by scholars in women's studies and women's history. Despite the recent debates regarding (postmodernist) "theory," practitioners across methodologies and disciplines share much more than these debates acknowledge. These shared underlying assumptions and drives produce narratives that are similar in content if not in form. Hence the critique that no matter how complicated the theory and language, the work of white women scholars is not substantially different. No theory will save us.

Master narratives are problematic on many levels yet in woman-centered inquiry the focus is on women. I argue that the focus on women, while ostensibly concerned with justice and freedom, does not actually engage either concept but rather bypasses these and other important broader social questions and problems. We need to problematize everything particularly what is taken as given. When is something a women's issue anyway? What is a woman? Embodiment and essentialism continue to be important markers despite claims to the contrary. The subject continues to be presupposed, an object identifiable by its body parts, always recognizable. The ways that social beings are continually reproduced at the everyday level through the rhythms and structures of everyday life remain invisible in this type of inquiry. Woman then becomes the only charged category. These are large issues. They are important because the way we formulate our inquiry will shape the results. Ultimately it is about what gets heard. It is about the stories we are telling.

The original premise that the mainstream was malestream is false. Scholarship in both women's studies and women's history illustrates that women as part of the social world are as implicated in its production and reproduction as men. This finding does not drive woman-centered inquiry. Woman as oppressed, as victim, as outside "power," as marginal to the circuits of public social relations, these are some of the underlying assumptions of these narratives. White middle class women's affinities to their own group are only now starting to receive critical attention by white scholars. Will these reconceptualizations substantially change the stories we are telling? The "inclusion" of race in the work of most white scholars has not changed the nature of the stories being generated. The thrust

remains unaltered, the ordering of knowledge and of the world remains unchallenged.

Heritage Canada television spots includes a piece on Emily Murphy and the "woman as person" case. How is the heritage moment different from other feminist texts? Is it a problem that it isn't different? What is the moral and ethical fabric of the story we claim as our own? While the woman-centered plot appears to uphold a liberationist posture, the details of the narratives, their underlying assumptions and political visions often do not. Instead they normalize established paradigms rather than challenge the established order. The Murphy moment for instance normalizes the western parliamentary paradigm and state relations in general, it bypasses imperialism and colonialism besides omitting Murphy's virulent racism and its implications for her vision of a citizen/subject/person. It intervenes in the dominant discourse only to make (white anglo-saxon middle class) woman subject. Conceptualizations of rights and persons, justice and the state in context of colonialism are all constitutive components of this narrative. Engaging these themes can substantially recast the content of this narrative and its place in current intellectual discourse. In this and other instances, then, a focus on women or gender can actually be a conservative move and even misleading to critical engagement and to human liberation.

The economy of woman-centered inquiry is riddled with these types of cul de sacs. The disciplinary separation of the sexes makes woman-centered inquiry a partial story at best. This ploy is accompanied by assumptions which further divorce our intellectual categories from the practices of everyday life since the fortunes of women and men are inextricably tied. Ideas of women's moral superiority over men and the fetishization of "things woman" assume that we already have the answers to ethical questions as part of our embodiment - at once to privilege and to deny the body, to rewrite the body, depending on the body. The denial of shelter to transsexual women victims of domestic violence, on the authorial claim that only some of us are women, follows from the poverty of our theories and marks the ethical bankruptcy of our practice of justice and protection.

The impulse of protection and liberation through legislating the body and through the criminalization of certain behaviors is another aspect of the feminist policing of bodies. Sexual harassment initiatives police interaction and intimate body gestures. Legislative efforts on such matters as age of consent and seduction are also part of this impulse to protect women through legislating bodies and their relations. In the name of empowering women, this tactic allows state systems of punishment to become the arbiter of personal interactions. Enactment of legislation is followed by the lament regarding the difficulty of convictions and that men are eluding the full penalty under the law. Contemporary or historical, these are staple ingredients in discussions on women and justice. These formulations evade engaging with and implicitly support prisons and imprisonment as just forms of retribution as well as a form of justice. These ethical questions and systems of punishment are all colluded with, made timeless and seemingly unchangeable, and passed over without murmur. Through woman as a point of entry, this narrative of policing intimate behavior through the state and the law are normalized all in the name of women's rights, the protection of women, in an aim to liberate women.

How have we conceived of justice and liberation? What kind of social relations are supported by our theory and practice, are being produced by it, and what kind of world will that be? Repressive outcomes are not a matter of status quo co-option as has often been asserted, but follow from the underlying assumptions that inform our formulation and practice. These are vital questions precisely because of the impact of woman-centered inquiry on academic bodies and on larger social relations.

The scripts from which our inquiry springs have to be radically rethought. Conceptualizations of the category woman and projects surrounding it need to be excavated to expose what they implicitly support and how they too are supported by existing social relations. How has the project of woman-centered inquiry been conceived and what are its implicit constraints on what comes under its rubric of women's issues or even on what can be said about a topic? At what junctures has the category woman been introduced, and how has this in itself shaped the meanings that are produced?

Ongoing critical reflexivity of the discipline is necessary to our commitment for human liberation.

Problematizing the entire social fabric is one way to match the liberationist impulse in woman-centered inquiry with its practice. Examining the social world as it is organized, with attention to the details of context, history, culture, race, class, power, and orientation, not as signposts but as relations, as each is defined and constituted by and through the others, can aid to avoid essentializing. For critical practice it is imperative to foster reflexivity about what we take as given. Reading widely, critically, creatively in order to compare, situate and historicize is one way of proceeding. Coming to our topics from a variety of vantage points can also add perspective and texture as well as avoiding the reproduction of dominant paradigms.

Recent reconceptualizations in woman-centered inquiry do not bode well for critical practice. No matter how complicated or transparent our theory and language, the stories we tell will be shaped by what we bring to the table, that is, our politics not embodiment. Critical analysis of the underlying assumptions that drive this inquiry, its ingredients, its logic and ethics, what is included and excluded in the threads that make up its fabric can help to illuminate what is obscured by the focus on women. But it needs to be said that problematizing, historicizing, contextualizing, and other methods of anchoring will not overcome the problematic assumptions that riddle these texts. It is a question of politics, of conceptions of justice and liberation, what we envision of the past and for the present.

*Georgia Sitara*

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**RELUCTANT HISTORIANS:  
BRINGING WOMEN'S STUDIES  
STUDENTS TO HISTORICAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS**

I teach women's history and women's studies at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. A course in women's history was not taught at StFX before my appointment in 1994 and a women's studies program did not exist before

1996. The challenges of teaching feminist-based courses at an undergraduate university with a "strong Catholic heritage" and a conservative student body that is, for the most part, ethnically and racially homogeneous have been considerable but not insurmountable. The women's studies program has grown over years and we have just hired our first tenure-track person to anchor the program. In this piece I would like to address a somewhat different set of challenges, and that being my attempts to integrate a historical perspective, and along with this, feminist historical scholarship, into an introductory women's studies course.

My initial foray was not particularly successful. Despite generally positive comments about the introductory women's studies course I taught three years ago, a large number of students informed me that they wanted less history in the course as it was "boring" and "unimportant." I was rather perplexed about this criticism as I had never received such comments from students taking my women's history class - requests to talk slower perhaps, but not that my approach or the material was "boring" or "unimportant." I was also puzzled because the historical material represented only a small proportion of the course content with attention given to the historical dimensions of a number of selected topics. As with many other women's studies courses taught across the country, I had sought to introduce my students to an array of issues and disciplinary approaches to feminist research. Yet only the history component of the course was targeted by my students for negative comment; there were no similar comments, for example, requesting that the course focus less on anthropological issues.

As I began to reflect upon the comments, I came to several realizations. To begin with, I had taken too much for granted that my women's studies students would easily recognize the many insights that feminist historical scholarship has to offer, and the relevance and importance of a historical perspective. This was something which I had not taken for granted in my women's history course, in part because of the usual composition of that class - with more students interested in history than a feminist analysis. Admittedly though, students in the women's history course have a much greater opportunity to immerse themselves in and gain a greater appreciation of this field. As the evaluations

also made clear, many of the students had enrolled in the women's studies course because of a particular interest in contemporary women's issues and some were impatient with my efforts to provide historical context and analysis.

I have subsequently tried to reinforce in my introductory women's studies course the contributions of feminist historical scholarship by demonstrating: how gender, race, class and sexuality are interlocking systems of power that operate in complex and historically contingent ways; that gender and sex are socially and historically constructed; and that knowledge itself is constituted and reconstituted in particular historical contexts. In addition, I have tried to emphasize that the study of history is a crucial part of women's studies curriculum, especially because it so consistently demonstrates the fluidity of social relations and identities. I have also concluded in the process that my students need more history not less.

Beyond the theoretical insights of feminist historical scholarship, I have realized that there is just so much more that they need to learn about women's lives and gender relations in the past in order to understand better contemporary feminist issues. I believe that this is especially important since the prejudices they so often display, at least in my course, about Aboriginal peoples, the poor, and racialized groups are clearly premised in part on a lack of historical understanding and analysis. A topic that has consistently engendered a great deal of discussion in my women's studies course is the issue of poverty with a consistent theme being that Aboriginal people are taking advantage of "the system," getting too much government assistance, and so too are poor white people, especially single mothers who are living on social assistance. There is a certain irony in the latter view given that many of these students do not come from economically privileged backgrounds, with a goodly proportion coming from quite economically marginal households, some of them even from households with a lone female parent. The works of authors such as Patricia Monture Angus on Aboriginal women and Margaret Little on single mothers have been extraordinarily helpful in providing a necessary historical perspective on the oppression of particular groups of women, and in the process, challenging the stereotypes and the prejudices that

many of them have long held (Little 1998; Monture 1993).

The scholarship of feminist historians is not only essential for illuminating how groups of people or individuals are oppressed; it also reveals how privilege operates. As has long been pointed out by various feminist scholars, the mechanisms of privilege often remain unexamined by those in relative positions of power. Certainly, two key forms of privilege that many of my students seem not to have reflected upon are heterosexuality and whiteness. And related to this, some have had considerable difficulty grasping that such forms of privilege are not unalterable, but rather elaborate social constructs. Here too, I have found that selected historical works have proven to be essential for making more visible to students the shifting terrain and internal mechanisms of such forms of privilege (Adams 1997; Bederman 1995; Dubinsky 1993; Frank 1998).

My efforts to reinforce the importance of a historical perspective and the theoretical insights of feminist historical scholarship, however, have not met with entire success. My students have been exposed to so little history (I teach in a province where history is not a mandatory subject in high school) that they have had problems in making connections between broader historical patterns and feminist historical scholarship. Many students, for example, have little knowledge of Canada's colonial legacy which then makes it difficult for them to fully comprehend and adequately contextualize the ongoing challenges that Aboriginal women and men face. Not surprisingly then, students can find it difficult to go beyond a superficial understanding of an issue.

I am by no means the only feminist scholar to hear consistently from one's students that "sure it wasn't great for some women in the past, but it is just so much better now." Many of my students often emphasize, in particular, that almost all of the significant changes that have taken place in women's lives in the last thirty years have been beneficial, this despite very telling examples to the contrary; they seem to have a considerable willingness to downplay or overlook the fact that some of these changes have not been positive or that some women have benefited at the expense of others due to the ongoing inequities of race, class, and nation. This is especially frustrating when one

assigns an article such as Audrey Macklin's piece on changing government immigration policies directed at domestics which so clearly illustrates that the professional and family aspirations of middle-class, mostly Euro-Canadian women, have been achieved over the past number of decades at the expense of low-paid and often exploited immigrant domestics who care for their children (Macklin 1994). Here too, I think historical scholarship is essential, although my students seem reluctant to recognize that not only does societal change result in worsened circumstances for some people, but that forms of domination and exploitation have not so often declined or disappeared as been reformulated in another fashion.

I wonder if some of my students' ongoing reluctance to appreciate the relevance and importance of a feminist historical approach might not have something to do with the rather limited public profile of women's historians and their scholarship. The enormously important contributions of feminist historical scholarship seem to have barely registered beyond the academy and it is barely even acknowledged in recent public debates about the importance and role of history. Of course, I underscore contributions as feminist historical scholarship has been vilified as one of the "players" in these undermining our national heritage (Granatstein 1998). I have been encouraged though by the recent media coverage of Karen Dubinsky's work on heterosexuality and honeymooning in Niagara Falls and Cecilia Morgan's on Laura Secord in that it may signal a modest change in public perceptions (Dubinsky 1999; Morgan 1994).

While teaching women's studies has posed particular challenges, it has reinforced my commitment to interdisciplinarity and the important role of history as part of such an approach. My students' occasional skepticism about the necessity of a historical perspective and the value of feminist historical scholarship has, if anything, allowed me to better clarify the ongoing contributions of this field. I first embraced feminism because I was so inspired by the important insights of a generation of women's historians writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I believe that feminist historical scholarship continues to serve as an important avenue through which women's studies students

begin to think about questions related to oppression, privilege, and the possibilities for change.

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#### TROUBLING THE NATION: ON TEACHING CANADIAN HISTORY IN THE WOMEN'S STUDIES CLASSROOM

In her essay on "Feminism and Feminist History," Catherine Hall observes that, "The meaning of being an historian over the last twenty years, of trying to do certain kinds of historical work, has significantly changed" (1992). As someone who began undergraduate work in history over twenty years ago, much of Hall's account resonated. Feminism has contributed very significantly to that change, as she details, and so have the crucial contributions made by historians of sexuality and gender; moreover the serious theoretical, methodological, and political challenges

posed by post-modernist, post-structuralist, and post-colonialist perspectives clearly must also be referenced here.

In this paper, I want to approach the theme of women's studies and women's history by commenting on the politics of teaching historical materials within the introductory women's studies classroom.<sup>1</sup> In this setting perhaps the most significant shift has been in response to calls by working-class women, lesbians, and especially by women of colour for a feminist analysis and practice which can take seriously the fundamental lines of social difference among women. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz remarks in a recent essay, "if that first phase of women's studies might be characterized as 'add women and stir'...the next phase, initiated by the challenge of identity politics, asked: Add *which* women and stir? Who does the stirring?" (Kaye/Kantrowitz 1999, 15). Of course, Kaye/Kantrowitz's narrative rather simplifies and telescopes years of difficult struggle and transformation within the women's movement and in women's studies; nonetheless, it does state succinctly how the issues are often understood.

My own interest is in historicizing and locating questions of race, class, sexuality, gender, and identities in order to avoid the ways in which these categories are often used in ahistorical and reified ways. It is also in keeping questions of power and the possibilities for social transformation at the centre, and in contributing to the current rethinking of the categories of Canadian history from an anti-racist perspective. As Himani Bannerji comments in "Politics and the Writing of History," "difference should be understood in terms of social relations and power and ruling, not as what people intrinsically *are*, but what they are ascribed in the context of domination" (1998, 289). With this approach in mind, I focus the first half of my Introduction to Women's Studies course on gender and the colonial domination of Aboriginal peoples, on the State and immigration policy, and on histories of racism and slavery in Canada. In the second half, we look at key institutions and practices with a view to developing an integrated analysis of contemporary social life.

The interdisciplinary character of the women's studies framework enables me to teach historically through a variety of texts: for example, to look at the internment of Japanese-Canadians

through a novel such as *Obasan*, or at colonialism through Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* or Jamaica Kincaid's masterful text, *Lucy*. For, as Lisa Lowe argues in her fascinating book of historical and cultural critique, *Immigrant Acts*, many people who have been colonized or who have experienced formal exclusion from "the nation" and from national histories find new ways of narrating histories that challenge both novelistic and historical forms (Lowe 1996). The women's studies classroom allows me to bring such questions of history, culture, and representation forward - a more difficult project, I suspect, in the traditional history classroom.

There is much debate about the extent to which fields such as women's studies and cultural studies have succeeded in truly challenging disciplinary practices. In addition, the project has become more difficult in the face of the current economic and intellectual restructuring of universities. Clearly, however, one benefit of interdisciplinary approaches is that they open up for discussion texts, topics, and methodologies which might not typically fall within a particular discipline. But critical interdisciplinarity is about something more: it means challenging the central assumptions, claims, and organization of disciplines themselves. As Lisa Lowe's comment suggests, this approach includes scrutinizing the operations of "the nation" within both literature and history.

Many students are puzzled by this emphasis in the course. They see history entirely in individual terms; they want me to do a history of great women - Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" in the form of a course. They are resistant to critical interpretations of the narrative of Canadian history because they view them as "depressing" and "all bad." Still others read structured racial and economic domination in culturalist and/or individualist terms: colonialism for them is the story of a "culture clash" between "the European" and "the aboriginal"; racism is discussed at the level of innocence, good intentions, or "ignorance." Others articulate quite disturbing views. At the end of last academic year, for example, I had a visit from one of my Intro students. She was concerned about a low mark on a final paper in which she made the argument that immigration policy ought to be based on "blood." When pressed, she could not tell me what she meant by "blood," nor could she form any

reply whatsoever when I asked her how her vision of who had the right to enter the country took into account Aboriginal realities and claims. Eventually, she mumbled something about how she admired how European nations seemed to have clear identities. Of course, this view of Europe is as profoundly problematic as her story of blood and belonging (Nederveen Pieterse 1994).

But one of the things this incident taught me was that I needed to put renewed emphasis in the course on precisely these constructions of nation as communities of blood, and on the need to deconstruct the nation, not just offer an alternative reading of the history of Canada from the standpoint of the excluded. Without such a critical interrogation of "nation," we will be forever limited by approaches to Canadian history which cannot, ultimately, move beyond a liberal multiculturalist emphasis on the "contributions" to the nation made by various peoples. What is more, critical examination of the operations of "nation" within historical narrative has become particularly politically and intellectually urgent in the current context of global restructuring and a resurgence of racism and anti-Semitism in many national contexts.

Within women's studies some of the smartest and most politically important work is responding to these conditions, for example, work by Jacqui Alexander, Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewel, and Chandra Mohanty. Collections such as *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* are exemplary in this regard (Alexander and Mohanty 1997). Of course, this move to put women's studies and feminism in a global frame is fraught with debates about how precisely to do that without re-inscribing the terms and categories of mainstream Western feminism. Institutionally, we have a considerable way to go towards internationalizing the women's studies curriculum in Canada. Focus is still very much on North America; responsibility for "the world" typically rests with the lone woman teaching international development. Still, there are shifts occurring in Canadian feminist scholarship, with some of the most important contributions coming from women whose personal and political histories are transnational (Heitlinger 1999).

Within history, this shift in women's studies has its parallel in the massive increase in

literature on gender, nation, colonialism, and imperialism as well in the move to develop courses in world and diasporic histories. This literature has made important interventions challenging the disciplinary and especially national boundaries in which history is being written. Indeed, Antoinette Burton has identified a siege mentality about national history among some conservative British and American scholars in response to this new scholarship. Here in Canada, we are once again seeing calls from strident conservative historians to return to the project of writing national history;<sup>2</sup> social and women's history is described as both trivial and yet contributing to the dismemberment of the nation. These kinds of contradictory arguments are clues to what is at stake here: what Burton calls "the complicity of history-writing in patrolling the borders of national identity" (Burton 1997). Given this context, it seems to me more important than ever that we examine with renewed vigour how this category of "nation" often goes unexamined even in our best attempts to offer anti-colonial, gendered, and classed readings of Canada's past.

Of course, approaching these questions within the introductory women's studies classroom poses some serious difficulties. For one thing, the sophistication of the new scholarship is hard to translate into the introductory setting where many students have little grounding in historiography or debates within history. For another, even the most careful pedagogical work does not always reach those students who want to narrate Canada's past as a story of (white European) blood and belonging and who resist critiques of colonialism, racism, and "nation." Yet the continued intellectual and political vigour of the overlapping fields of women's studies and women's history partly rests on our ability as teachers and scholars to take up these critical historical - and contemporary - questions.

*Cynthia Wright*

#### ENDNOTES

1. With many thanks to Lynne Marks for asking me to contribute to this special issue, and to Lynne and Annalee Golz for their helpful comments.
2. I am referring here, of course, to Jack L. Granatstein. *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).

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#### INTERDISCIPLINARITY AT ITS BEST: INTEGRATING WOMEN'S HISTORY INTO THE TEACHING OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

According to Gerda Lerner, history is important to women for many reasons, but most especially because it is a powerful means of establishing the form and meaning of contemporary existence. Women need to engage in history-making - that process of preserving and interpreting the past, and of reinterpreting it in light of new questions - because, Lerner contends, the process is vital to the establishment of an enduring sense of identity. A historical consciousness, she argues, frees people from the tyranny of presentism and provides us with a "usable" past. In short, it furnishes us with the tools we need to develop a critical awareness of ourselves and of our place in the human continuum (Lerner 1997, 116-18; 199-204). Given the responsibilities that women's studies has taken on - to critique and correct entrenched assumptions and misinformation about women both within and outside academe; to promote and disseminate new scholarship about women; and to strengthen the connections between

feminist theory and its practice - a more complete interweaving of women's history throughout women's studies is absolutely essential to the present and future of the field.

Observers have pointed out, however, that women's history is now largely marginalized in women's studies programmes. Critics charge that as women's history raises its (still tenuous) standing in mainstream history departments, it has become increasingly depoliticized. They argue that fewer women's historians are doing research which is guided by, or directly applicable to, the current concerns of feminist activists within and outside academe. Some maintain that this trend has in recent years led to the appropriation, by theorists and scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds, of the strong leadership role that many women's historians initially played in the development of women's studies. The result, they contend, has been an increased proclivity among women's studies scholars to place greater emphasis on scholarship developed with relatively little reference to historical perspectives or to the development of a historical consciousness in women (Bennett 1989; Kessler-Harris 1992; Schmidt 1993).

The content of women's studies programmes in universities around the world tends to substantiate the conclusion that history has indeed lost status in relation to other disciplines in the field. For example, the 1991 *Women's Studies International* survey of the programmes, research priorities, and institutional policies of women's studies centres in North America, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia indicates that women's history is not a central focus of study in the majority of these institutions (Rao 1991). My own random sampling of approximately 50 of nearly 500 women's studies programme outlines and course syllabi available on-line from universities in Canada, the United States, and abroad, as well as my personal experience as a women's studies instructor at two Canadian universities, supports this hypothesis as well. For the most part history is either absent from most women's studies course descriptions, or it is mentioned in such a way as to suggest that it plays only a minor role in the overall development of the course content.<sup>1</sup> At the upper levels most women's

studies courses tend to treat history as a separate subject, one which is isolated from contemporary issues and interdisciplinary work more generally. This is a trend that Gerda Lerner and others have attributed to a larger crisis which the historical profession faces as student interest in history wanes, the prospects of academic employment for historians dwindle, people increasingly question the worth of a humanities degree, and the universities restructure themselves in order to place greater emphasis on the sciences (Bennett 1989, 255; Helly and Reverby 1992; Kessler-Harris 1992, 263; Lerner 1997, 115). Nevertheless, I would still argue that history offers probably the strongest foundation upon which to build an interdisciplinary field like women's studies.

Women's studies scholars and educators have expressed real concern, in recent years, about the difficulty of practising and teaching the principles of interdisciplinarity, especially given the significant differences between, and the overall complexity of, the disciplinary modes of thought upon which women's studies draws. Women's studies scholars argue that to be truly interdisciplinary, this field requires, but has not yet developed, a new way of thinking, a common language, and a set of "ecumenical" theoretical constructs (Armatage 1996; Diamond 1985; McCormack 1996; Westbrook 1999). Women's history offers women's studies just that. The language, concepts, and methodology of history are still, for the most part, easily understood by non-historians. And because history is an element of nearly every university discipline, it provides an easy way to link the various fields. Moreover, history provides an important model of interdisciplinarity, for as the editors of the *Journal of Imperial and Post-Colonial Historical Studies* have recently pointed out, history:

...stands at the nexus of the humanities and the social sciences. Its scholars must address the quintessentially human forms of expression found in the arts and how their practitioners have approached them. At the same time, however, because historians study people in groups, they cannot ignore developments in the social sciences... [and those] who seek to explore

the changing relationships between human societies and their surrounding physical environs must be familiar with the methodological practices of the natural sciences as well. (H-CANADA 1999)

History can thus provide both a prototype for, and a means to, integrate the various university disciplines - a process which in turn helps to create the coherence which is so essential to student learning in an interdisciplinary environment, and so necessary to making new knowledge about women widely accessible.

In a fragmented post-modern world, a historical consciousness can help women's studies scholars to construct a more holistic and comprehensive sense of themselves and their community (Schmidt 1993, 86). A historical consciousness creates an awareness of the diversity and the continuity of past and present efforts to establish equitable relations in human society. It also allows us to trace the evolution of contemporary social formations. Because it is empirically grounded, it helps link feminist theory and practice both in and outside academe, and can help guard against reductionism and functionalism. In all, history can provide the coherent structure, vocabulary, and theoretical approach which is indispensable to interdisciplinary work. And as Alice Kessler-Harris has pointed out, feminists need a historical perspective now more than ever, if only to counter the claims of right-wing policy-makers who increasingly justify their reactionary stances on issues such as abortion or welfare by invoking the mythic past (Kessler-Harris 1992, 265). For without a historical consciousness we remain at the mercy of social myths.

Cathy L. James

#### ENDNOTE

1. I did find a few notable exceptions, such as York University and Duke, where history appears to be well-integrated into the women's studies programmes. It is important to add that I found significant diversity in the kind of information included in some of the websites, which made it difficult at times to judge the course content at more than a superficial level. That given, my conclusions are based on the programme and course descriptions and reports of the disciplinary origins of women's studies faculty (when accessible) at 11 Canadian, 26 American, and 9 transcontinental universities drawn from the Worldwide

Women's Studies Programs website and Canadian Women's Studies On-line.

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## CLIO'S DAUGHTERS AND THE LEGACY OF WOMEN'S STUDIES: WRITING GENDER INTO SOUTHERN CULTURAL HISTORY

There is no doubt that the history of women in the United States has been a growing and increasingly sophisticated field of research in the

last thirty years. Since the 1970s when Gerda Lerner assessed the field in "Placing Women in History" and Anne Firor Scott widened it with *The Southern Lady*, historians have described women's contributions to all periods, North, South, and West (Lerner 1975; Scott 1970). The result has been an inclusion of women of all classes and all races, best exemplified by the multicultural reader, *Unequal Sisters* (DuBois & Ruiz 1990). The sudden shift from the discovery of women's existence to the recognition of women as historical actors was tied to both the feminist movement and the creation of interdisciplinary women's studies. But a period of consolidation has come. Instead of strengthening women's history as a separate history, the agenda in the 1990s has been to reconfigure the grand narrative. The collection of essays published in recognition of Gerda Lerner's pioneering work illustrates that broader objective in the provocative title of *U.S. History as Women's History* (Kerber, Kessler-Harris & Sklar 1995). In this effort to debate among historians and to explore the role of gender in the traditional fields of state formation and knowledge, the contribution of women's studies has been far less visible than in the earlier phase of expansion of the 1970s and the 1980s.

And yet, a closer look reveals the lasting impact of the interdisciplinary endeavor of women's studies upon the study of past women. Particularly telling is the intricate question not only of gender but also of class, race, and region that southern women's history has brought into the limelight. Long marginalized by a dominant focus on the Northeast in women's history, southern women were "half sisters of history" (Clinton 1994). With the exception of pioneering work by Julia Cherry Spruill (1938) and Anne Firor Scott (1970), the coming of age of southern women's history dates from the mid-1980s with monographs on African American and white women (Lebsock 1984; White 1985). At that time, the new scholarship on gender in the South significantly bypassed the shortcomings of an earlier, more polarized [northern] scholarship that overused the binary oppositions of male and female, public and private, workplace and home. How much credit should be given to either women's studies or deconstruction and postmodern theory is hard to say. In any case,

the result has been broad questioning of the category "woman" and an effort to conceptualize differences among women, not just gender differences but racial differences as well. Beyond dichotomies of male and female, white and black, free and slave, feminist scholars of the South have recognized the fragility of old certainties. Even categories of manhood and womanhood have been destabilized by subtle differences where gender was not a single analytic category but inevitably linked with class and race. In turn, the foremost boundaries between whiteness and blackness like the polarized images of the untouchable white woman and the black lynching victim had to be reexamined through the lens of gender. As Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson (1997, 16) have recently argued in a collection of literary and historical essays: "In the South gender and race haunt one another as they haunt the region's bodies."

Activism by women of color in the United States both inside and outside academia, and simultaneously the search for a global feminist model, have made the "bonds of womanhood" (Cott 1977) less relevant to apprehending women's experience in the past and emphasized both diversity and conflict instead of sisterhood. Similarly, more studies of the plantation household have complicated the gender binary of the separate spheres. When the home continued to be a place of production, and female slaves were valued for both their productive work and reproductive ability, the boundaries of female domesticity and male public sphere were more subtle than the paradigm of gendered spheres has suggested. Even more ambiguous has been the status of the white mistress. Oppressed by patriarchy, she nonetheless belonged to the ruling, slaveholding class and thus participated in the oppression of blacks, men, and women (Clinton 1982; Fox-Genovese 1988).

The history of southern women and the gender construction of the South have greatly benefitted from the critique of fixed categories associated with women's studies. Whether this is due to the existence of women's studies as a separate institutional body, or merely to the expansion of feminist scholarship as a field of inquiry in all disciplines including history, this is another issue to debate. What is certain, however, is that women's studies has already provided historians of women, particularly historians of

southern women in the United States, with conceptual tools to revise an earlier paradigm of a sex-segregated world and sisterly bonds. In turn, Clio's daughters have gained from gender studies without challenging their own disciplinary affiliation, somewhat in the same way as their forefathers earlier in the twentieth century appropriated questions and methodologies from the new social sciences, while retaining their allegiance to history.

More important, I would argue, is the bifurcation between two different paths that seems to characterize current research on women. Women's studies in the United States tries to shift its primary focus from identity politics to globalism, bridging differences between First and Third World locations, while questioning a unified category of gender. Best described by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994, 9-18) as "transnational feminism," in opposition to "global feminism" which implies cultural homogenization and imperialism from the West, the transnational project seeks to go beyond binary divisions like center-periphery and global-local. By contrast, historians of United States women have been reconceptualizing differences among women by reducing the scale of analysis to the regional, the local, and the personal, as opposed to universal principles.

Particular areas of women's history have been more prone than others to borrow the interdisciplinary legacy of women's studies without embracing the larger, global or transnational model of the latter. Perhaps the most obvious is the historical inquiry into personal narratives and autobiographies, first developed in literary studies, and more recently appended to the project of writing the individual back into the collective; a historical approach wrongly characterized as the return of the subject. The search for the hidden transcripts of women's existence in the past has led to deeper analysis of women's letters and non-canonical texts, such as the narrative of the former slave and illiterate black abolitionist Sojourner Truth or the private journal of a Georgia white woman, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, during and after the Civil War (Burr 1990; Painter 1996). Likewise, historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (1998) explores the links between memory, history, and the personal voice of the autobiographer in a

study of Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, a southern author of the 1940s. To be sure, this endeavor of interweaving the singular and the plural has not been the exclusive province of southern women's history. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's presentation of the fascinating diary of a New England midwife in the early republic is probably the most telling example of a close reading of historical texts long overlooked (Ulrich 1990). Similarly, the story of Helen Jewett, a New York prostitute who fell victim to both her beau and the mass media of the new metropolis has been retold in minute detail (Cohen 1998).

In the end, even though women's history may well follow the direction of microscopic research as small as a community, a family, an individual, while women's studies envisions a macroscopic, globalized paradigm, historians of women continue to appropriate the theoretical underpinnings of women's studies, particularly the intersection of gender with race and class. I would further suggest, for instance, that the question of the distinctiveness of women's culture in the Old South and the provocative concept of "a culture of resignation" (Cashin 1996) cannot be fully explored without the interdisciplinary contribution of women's studies, cultural studies, and literary studies. In apprehending the culture of white southern women, which they may have shared either with African American women, or southern men, or northern women, or European women, or interchangeably with all those groups depending on the activity and the moment, women's historians may require the help of women's studies to link the multiple webs of reference and grasp the complex and in a sense global experience of women of the past.

*Isabelle Lehuu*

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## WOMEN'S STUDIES AND WOMEN'S HISTORY

Over the past quarter century, women's history has played an important role in shaping women's studies as an autonomous area of scholarly research. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, women's studies programmes and publications were established through the efforts of feminists working in a range of disciplines, including history. Even a brief perusal of Canadian women's studies journals, *Atlantis* and *Canadian Woman Studies*, reveals the regular and important contributions of feminist historians. Likewise, historians have assumed their share of duties administering Canadian women's studies programmes, labours that reflect feminist historians' ongoing commitment to interdisciplinary teaching and research. Despite this healthy working relationship, the current intellectual relationship is slightly more troubled, and troubling. True, some of the tensions stem from the structural limitations that institutions, such as universities and professional organizations, place on interdisciplinary research (Allen and Kitch 1998) but other tensions are specific to historical scholarship itself. In particular, I am concerned about the awkward place history holds in current women's studies research methodology.

My attention was first drawn to history's ambiguous location by a curious dimension of the women's studies doctoral programme at my home university. York University's free-standing graduate programme requires that students complete three of five core courses. Of the five core offerings, "Feminist Theory" and "Feminist Methodology" both consider the theoretical and methodological approaches of various disciplinary traditions, while "Women and Public Policy" draws on the "social sciences" (geography, political science, economics, sociology) and "Women and Culture" pulls together feminist themes in the humanities (literature, philosophy, classical studies, the arts). In sharp contrast to these explicitly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary offerings, the final core option "Women's History" stands alone as a discipline-based course. Perhaps, as some have observed, this privileged (or marginal) position history occupies reflects merely the evolution of our particular programme. After all, university programmes do grow out of specific institutional

possibilities and traditions (Larkin 1998; Yee 1998). And I must acknowledge that as an active participant in York's Women's Studies programme, I have been complicit in the decision to set historical discussions apart from other interdisciplinary or thematic approaches to feminist scholarship.

But is also clear that we at York have not been alone in finding it difficult to integrate history into the larger *interdisciplinary* project<sup>1</sup> (Amin 1999). Consider the well-known article by feminist philosopher of science, Sandra Harding. In her "Is There a Feminist Method in Science?" Harding argues that although a distinctly feminist epistemology and methodology exist, in terms of actual research method, there are only three kinds available to researchers: we watch people, we listen to what they say, and we do "historical analysis" (1989). In Harding's otherwise clear discussion, "historical analysis" is never defined, nor does Harding acknowledge that "listening," or even watching, might be part of contemporary historical method.

These examples suggest how difficult it now seems to interrogate, or integrate, what it is that historians do, or how they specifically contribute to our understanding of women and gender. It is thus ironic that at this particular intellectual juncture, it is commonplace, even au courant, for researchers hailing from a range of methodological approaches to proclaim that we must historicize. Recent feminist scholarship regularly reminds readers that gender, and its relations with class, race, sexuality, and/or ethnicity, must be understood in their historically specific contexts. But what does this mean exactly? What does historicizing involve? And how much "history" do students have to undertake to learn how to "historicize"? These questions are relevant not only for women's studies students interested in excavating gender relations of past eras, but also for students of history seeking to use current debates in feminist theory to rethink conventional historical explanations.

Most would agree that historicizing is more than just becoming familiar with the society under study - who was the prime minister or how much sugar was exported that year. Analyzing gender in its historically specific context demands that, regardless of their disciplinary or

interdisciplinary approach, students must read the appropriate secondary literature and consult well-crafted social, political, or economic histories of the era. Probing how a society in the past conceived of and deployed gender (or race or sexuality or class) can produce excellent analyses of that "moment," but historicizing should not stop there. It must include an understanding of the dynamic elements of that gendered regime and how gendered norms provoked social change or were transformed by social change. Interest in historical change has waned of late, especially among researchers who, inspired by post-structuralist theory, have rejected the "metanarratives" offered by earlier feminist theories of patriarchy or by Marxists-feminist efforts to link changes in gender relations with the changing means of production (Scott 1988). Thus, even though one of the first contributions feminist historians made was to expose how patriarchy was not transhistorical, but took specific form in different societies, in the current climate attention has shifted away from articulating processes and forces of change. In practical terms, this means that feminist students - in both women's studies and history - are now very skilled at teasing out how a specific set of gender codes got established in a particular cultural or political "moment" but are somewhat less skilled at explaining why those codes did or did not persist in the face of other fundamental economic, political, or social transformations. We may not need metanarrative, but we do need some explanation of how gendered power relations have proved so resilient in the face of so many other powerful social forces.

Of course, feminist research is not only shaped by the questions we ask, but also by the sources we consult, so that successful historicizing requires that scholars critically assess the possibilities and limitations of available evidence. Historical scholarship is not, as Karen Dubinsky reminds us, just "telling stories about dead people" (1998). Rather, it involves a careful interrogation of what we can "know" from the available sources, an analysis of who was telling the story, whose interests that telling served, other versions of the story currently circulating, and how the story was received. Such methodological preoccupations once sat well with feminist scholars who recognized that to understand women's experiences they had to

question the authority of traditional documentary evidence and locate sources that gave women voice. But with the ascent of post-structuralist theory, many feminists stopped searching for "a definitive meaning for any document or text we read" and sought instead to "deconstruct the multiple, competing and fractured meanings of categories, texts and identities...." (Iacovetta and Mitchinson 1998). To undertake such deconstruction, scholars such as historian Joan Scott have advocated bridging the divide between history and literary criticism: in Scott's words "reading for 'the literary'" (1992). In part this means that all documents are defined as "texts," but so too should historical events be considered "non-discursive texts." In other words, both words and events are represented through "texts," discursive or non-discursive, and need to be analyzed in relation to each other (Newton 1989). For history, as well as other disciplines, this "linguistic turn" has prompted some theorists to question "the foundations of established historical practice" (Iacovetta and Mitchinson, 1998).

As recent debates on the pages of scholarly journals have revealed, feminist historians disagree over the usefulness of post-structuralist theory, and my aim is not to review those debates here (*Signs* 1990; *left history* 1995 and 1996). There is no doubt that feminist historical research has been invigorated and challenged by the theorists such as Joan Scott (1996) and Denise Riley (1988). And there is no doubt that feminist students in history departments and women's studies programmes alike are engaging with literary and post-structuralist theory. Rather, I want to offer methodological cautions that emerge from the conventions of historical practice. The first is that although current theory emphasizes the range of meanings of a text or event, the possibilities are not limitless and it is up to the researcher to contextualize the possible range of meanings within the society that produced it. Events or actions in the past may be open to the same interpretive tools as other visual or literary texts - that is, we may want to trace the metaphoric or symbolic bases of the event - but did the "audiences" in the past understand events and documents as comparable "texts"? A "non-discursive text," such as throwing a brick in a race riot, may have contained the same metaphoric power as a "discursive text," like publishing a racist

cartoon; but did the owner of the broken window respond in kind to both "texts"? As researchers, we may want to expose the "fiction" of race or gender, but for citizens in past societies racism or sexism was "fact" not "fiction," at least as they understood those terms to mean. Put another way, historians who focus on the symbolism of events or words need to distinguish how historical texts were understood by people of the time as either/both symbolic and actual representations of the world around them.

A second cautionary note relates to the knowledge claims made from a documentary source. Let's use Mary Poovey's 1988 *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988) and its excellent analysis of the origins of modern nursing as an example. Poovey argues convincingly that Victorian society had established dichotomized gender categories of the "normal (domestic) woman" and the "abnormal (working) woman." Nursing was what Poovey has termed a "border case," in that it did not appear to fit neatly into either category. In fact, nurses' presence in the workforce threatened to "expose the artificiality of the binary logic that governed the Victorian symbolic economy." Nursing reformer Florence Nightingale was a pivotal force in neutralizing the "disruptive potential" of nursing. As a result, Nightingale was able to guarantee nursing's legitimate place in the modern health care system. Up to the point where Poovey analyzes the binary logic of Victorian society and nurses' potential threat to it, Poovey makes an important contribution. But Nightingale did not entirely resolve the question: it took another twenty years before parents across the western world were convinced that nursing was a respectable occupation for their daughters (McPherson 1996). Thus the "social history" evidence suggests a longer, more complex process in which Nightingale was not the sole agent of historical change, whereas the "intellectual" history of Nightingale's writings and thought tells a different story. This is not to suggest that Poovey needed to undertake the social historical research, only that she circumscribe the knowledge claims made from her limited literary documentary base.

Work such as Poovey's is exciting in the analytic tool it offers, but at the same time such studies can be unsatisfying in terms of the depth of

research base, complexity of analysis of different levels of society, or understanding of social change. As esteemed feminist historian Natalie Zemon Davis recently explained: "Historians should seek evidence about the past widely and deeply, and should keep their minds as open as they can when they collect and assess it....'Keeping one's mind open' means developing techniques for detachment and imaginative perception as historians collect and think. Let the past be the past" (2000).

The methodological cautions are not designed to construct "history" as some magical realm, or ancient alchemy. Feminist scholars have shown that, like gender, disciplines were constructed within specific historical circumstances (Bock 1989; Friedman 1998). Rather, my aim is to push feminist historians and women's studies scholars alike to theorize more thoroughly their intellectual and methodological (not just political) relationship. What does it mean to cross disciplinary lines, and how do we train new scholars to capitalize on disciplinary strengths and on the lessons of interdisciplinary study? And how many disciplines does one have to be "between" or "among" in order to fulfill the interdisciplinary mandate? Susan Stanford Friedman has argued for the practical advantage of having students acquire a disciplinary base: "[Interdisciplinarity] is most successful when it emerges out of a firm grasp of the knowledge bases and methodologies of at least one of the existing disciplines" (1998). Yet Friedman's approach might not necessarily provoke an explicit comparison of disciplinary traditions, and may reproduce, rather than make visible, the boundaries between and among those traditions.

Staking out the ground between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity is complicated when advocates of interdisciplinarity have defined their approach as "transgressive," as crossing disciplinary boundaries that are static and conservative (Steinberg 1996). Such an opposition underestimates the degree to which critical methodology has been debated "within" disciplines, with feminist scholars challenging colleagues to reconsider conventional disciplinary boundaries. Feminist historians, for example, have been a critical force in pushing historical methodology away from unreflective empiricism, relying almost exclusively on written texts, to confront questions of voice and representation, of oral testimony, of

silences in the archives, and of identity (Newton 1989). The sustained cross-disciplinary dialogue that feminist historians have pursued with their colleagues in sociology, literature or anthropology reflects the wider process whereby traditional disciplinary boundaries have been "transgressed" and redrawn from within.

Such inter-disciplinary dialogue has produced more than what Linda Hutcheon has called "disciplinary tourism," but her larger point is well taken: to undertake interdisciplinary research "it is necessary to spend a lot of time and effort learning the discourse of another discipline, learning how to formulate and articulate the issues. This kind of undertaking is arduous, and can be dangerous." Nonetheless, Hutcheon admits, "feminist research has given us one strong methodological and ideological framework in which to consider collaborative alliances and communities" (1997). As feminist researchers, those of us who bridge women's history and women's studies must push students, our programmes, and ourselves to interrogate the marginal, or at least ambiguous, position historical research now holds with respect to women's studies if we are to ensure that the collaborative relationship we have built is not only institutional but intellectual and methodological.

*Kathryn McPherson*

#### ENDNOTE

1. For example, I was a co-editor on a Women's Studies reader that included a distinct "histories" section, in contrast to the rest of the text that was arranged thematically (Amin 1999).

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