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Reframing National Women's History Month: Practicalities and Consequences

by

Skylar Bre'z

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
History  
Western Michigan University  
May 2021

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## Reframing Women's History Month: Practicalities and Consequences

Skylar Bre'z, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2021

This study evaluates the practicalities and consequences of designating one month (March) out of the calendar year for the commemoration of women's history. In the 1970s and 1980s, national women's organizations such as the Women's Action Alliance (WAA) collaborated with the Smithsonian Institute and the Women's History Program at Sarah Lawrence College to build programs to increase awareness of women's history. Using an interdisciplinary approach grounded in feminist theory, media studies, and historical memory studies, this project contextualizes the commemoration through its connection to 1970s women's activism, explores its usefulness as a tool for building educational equity, and questions its contribution to the development of a collective historical narrative. The commemoration of Women's History Month sits in a critical space. Despite the benefits of annual public celebrations, women's history remains routinely undervalued. Celebration equates to empowerment. Yet, taught as an elective topic of History, given a public voice for only 31 days, power excludes its practice.

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2021

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers,

Helen Mejeur and Johanna Kokmeyer.

One a writer, one a teacher.

I hope I've done you proud.

And to my grand-niece

Hudsyn Noelle.

You're the future, baby girl.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During a late night conversation with my husband Tom, dying from liver cancer, we talked about what he regretted most. Finishing his college degree topped his list. Less than a year later, inspired by him, I returned to school. Neither of us could have predicted on that dark night where that conversation would lead. I know he is proud.

My education and the dissertation writing process have been a gift and the ultimate test of perseverance, a journey that required the coalition of so many people invested in my success. First, I am very grateful for the kindness and inspiration given to me by my doctoral committee members. Always ready with encouraging guidance, Ed Martini, Mitch Kachun, and Susan Freeman illustrate every day that dedication to something you believe in makes a difference in the world. Thank you for believing in me when I struggled to believe in myself.

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Additionally, I want to thank two early mentors in my education. Jon Adams, who

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encouraged me to apply to grad school. What an adventure it's been. You were right - grad school challenged me in many unforeseen ways. And, Gwen Raaberg. I knew I had found my intellectual home when I walked into my first GWS class. And when she shared her "Dr." story, I knew I had to follow in her footsteps. I am blessed to have her as a mentor and a friend.

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My friends and family have offered endless support in what often seemed like an infinite education process. Thank you all, for continuing to believe in me and to believe in the value of education. You are the reason I kept going forward in this process. To my daughter Galadriel/Jack, you bless me with your presence in my life. And, above all, thank you to Jaynee Michaels. Always there to read a draft, hash out an idea, and order Erbelli's on the really

## Acknowledgments-Continued

stressful or celebratory days. You inspire me, every day. Here's to 30 more years.

Finally, thank you to my students. May you continue to ask the hard questions, use your voices, and learn your history.

Skylar Bre'z



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
NWHP	National Women's History Project
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center
UDC	United Daughter of the Confederacy
WAA	Women's Action Alliance
WEEA	Women's Equity Education Act

## INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1970s, Molly Murphy MacGregor taught a course on women's history at a community college in Santa Rosa, California. MacGregor assigned her students a project: listing available books in the school library that focused on or included women. Students located few sources. Those texts available had lingered unborrowed for years. This exercise confirmed MacGregor's suspicions: the history of women was largely absent in public education.

In her role as Director of the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women, MacGregor sought to develop a teaching curriculum that celebrated and studied women's achievements. To this end, MacGregor organized a task force devoted to curriculum development. MacGregor also participated in the Women's History Institute at Sarah Lawrence College in summer, 1979. At the Institute, MacGregor shared her ultimate goal: a national weeklong celebration of women's history, coinciding with International Women's Day, March 8.

MacGregor's experience as an educator and activist coincided with historian Gerda Lerner's observations concerning the representation of women in historical record. Lerner, a founder of the Women's History field, perceived that the male-dominated vocation of history largely centered its scholarship on the public actions of men and masculine representations of power. Lerner wanted recognition for women as the majority population that they were, rather than as the submissive, matrimonial helpmate prevalent in popular historical discourse. Recognizing that women's efforts of community-building, social reform, and public decision-making were absent from much of traditional patriarchal and androcentric history, Lerner

insisted on reframing the narratives of history to be inclusive of women's experiences.<sup>1</sup> Lerner argued for a different approach to historical scholarship, one that recognized, "to interpret the female past from a female-centered point of view demands that we question and redefine the values by which we order historical data."<sup>2</sup> Only by making women's experiences an integral component of history would women become a part of the recognized historical narrative. This became the primary goal of activists mobilized to institute a national commemoration of women's history.

In the 1970s, coalitions developed between women's activist organizations and educators. National women's organizations such as the Women's Action Alliance (WAA) collaborated with the Smithsonian Institute and the Women's History Program at Sarah Lawrence College to build programs to increase awareness of women's history. K-12 educators joined this community of women by implementing library programs, writing contests, art shows, and curriculums that featured women. Community museums developed "Women's Hall of Fame" exhibits to honor individual achievements. Historians of women dedicated scholarly resources to establishing archives of material, hosting lectures and cultural events, writing books, and encouraged women's organizations to preserve historical artifacts. The National Women's History Project (NWHP), founded in 1980, acted as an informational clearinghouse for teachers, community organizations, and the public, with the sole goal of increasing knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Lerner's critique of the heterocentrism of history is limited. Two lesbian position papers are included in her edited book, *The Female Experience: An American Documentary* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), reflecting a contemporary perspective of lesbian/feminism coalitions. Adrienne Rich, in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4, 1980): 633, noted that in her Preface, Lerner references only how accusations of "deviance" are used to divide women and "discourage women's resistance."

<sup>2</sup> Gerda Lerner, "US Women's History: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (2004): 24.

of women's history. Addressing the importance of working together, Ruth Abram, director of WAA, acknowledged that, "to meet each new challenge and issue, women leaders have too often had to reinvent the wheel. An understanding of our heritage helps us to see ourselves as part of a community of women, and our struggles as a continuation of the struggles of women before us."<sup>3</sup>

The organizations and academics who sought to establish the federally recognized Women's History Month focused on increasing public awareness of women's history as a valuable resource to expand women's political, economic, and societal equity. Likewise, historians of women recognized that the use of the term "Women's History" called into question the claim of universality which "History" generally assumes as a given.<sup>4</sup> Determined to challenge the limiting suppositions of history, Lerner and other historians declared women's history to be a methodology, a strategy, and a point of view - a necessary framework to review, challenge, and expand both history and the historical record.

Historians of women, and women working as historians, have expanded scholarship on women's experiences exponentially. Yet, women's history remains routinely undervalued in many publicly disseminated historical narratives. In this dissertation, I investigate and evaluate the practicalities and consequences of designating one month (March) out of the calendar year for the commemoration of women's history. Focusing on Women's History Month activism during the 1970s and 1980s, I examine the coalition building efforts, educational applications,

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Foye-Cox, "History of National Women's History Month," PATimes: American Society for Public Administration website, <http://patimes.org/history-national-womens-history-month/>.

<sup>4</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): xiii.

and archive/resource creation that influenced the study and celebration of women's history during this period.

The alliances between women's organizations and scholars in the development of a national commemoration validated a common goal of establishing women's history as a symbol of authority. Coalitions between organizations and scholars developed necessary practical learning experiences. However, organizational structures and academic investments also limited implementation of developing programs, resulting in undesirable representational exclusions of race, socioeconomics, and/or sexuality.

Women's History Month commemorations also advanced important educational development, supporting important legislative and public sector investments in educational equity. By creating content and building programs inclusive of marginalized groups, education activists hoped to address structural inequalities based on a lack of access to education, uneven income distribution, and gendered disparity. Notably, these same structural inequalities also subjected the economic resources needed to develop and sustain these educational programs to political backlash.

The historical resources and archives developed to commemorate women's history offer insight into the value of developing a collective narrative of history, as well as the challenges. The celebration of Women's History Month implies public worth. Remembered, contextualized, even critiqued, the resulting commemoration of women's experiences confirms a valued place in history. Yet, despite the development and use of extensive archives, legislation, and material culture, traditional historical narratives that exclude women persist.



By contextualizing the commemoration of Women's History Month through its connection to 1970s women's activism, its usefulness as a tool for building educational equity, and its contribution to the development of a collective historical narrative, I seek to advance a more complex understanding of Women's History Month. Valuable as a marker of women's achievements, Women's History Month is also an opportunity to restructure the practice of History, to be more inclusive. While this dissertation focuses on the practicalities and challenges of a singular commemorative month, this scholarship seeks to advance dismantling of the arbitrary and often hierarchal limits placed on the practice of History.

Welcomed and appreciated by educators, legislators, and the public, celebration of Women's History Month expanded to the full month of March in 1987. Nevertheless, the practice of designating a singular month for the study and celebration of the history of women sustains a symbolic marginalization of women. While Women's History Month recognizes the important contributions of women to history, setting aside one month to practice this inclusion maintains a status quo favoring men as historically predominate. As a result, women remain a category of history rather than fully recognized historical actors.

### Defining the Contradictions: Women's/History/Month

Throughout this dissertation, I will use the term "history" in different ways. When addressing the public practice of history, I will use lowercase. When discussing the academic discipline of History, I will use upper case. My simple definition of history: the study of past events contextualized by varied human experiences. However, this definition also recognizes that based on "just the facts" of time, place, events, and actors, history is never simple or

straightforward. The flaw of history: historians. Historians come to the study of history with their own biases, informed by gender, race, socioeconomic class, sexuality, and many other factors. Given the androcentric tradition of the academic discipline of History, as well as the sustained patriarchal society History reflects, I argue that the practice of history frequently relegates women's history to a secondary or supporting status. Generations of historians of women have been highly successful in their scholarship and their careers, taking respected positions as leaders of historical associations, building successful conferences, publishing esteemed journals and manuscripts, as well as educating countless students. Yet, frequently women's history continues to be a separate category of historical study, peripheral to History. Public requests for historical references continue to over-rely on male scholars as the voice of authority.<sup>5</sup> While the work of women as historians is not marginal to the field, public and professional gender biases do result in routine exclusion or marginalization.

The term "woman" also requires clarification. Throughout this dissertation, I will use feminist gender theory as my guiding analytical tool. As a result, I use the term "woman," and its plural "women," as a reference to those individuals routinely classified as "other" and subordinated in society, historically by men. While I will not be addressing specific histories of transwomen, I do acknowledge that their experiences as women are valuable elements worthy of further study. The term "women's history" is more problematic for me, as the term reinforces the exact marginalization that I am analyzing. Given the limitations of language, I choose to use the terms "historian of women" and "history of women" to emphasize the ideal

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<sup>5</sup> The website [www.womenalsoknowhistory.com](http://www.womenalsoknowhistory.com) was created to address systemic gender bias by offering a database of women historians. As the opening webpage notes, *"So often while planning a conference, brainstorming a list of speakers, or searching for experts to cite or interview, it can be difficult to think of any ... scholars who aren't male. We've all been there.... you just know that a woman has got to be studying that topic... but who?"*

of history as a standard of equity and inclusivity: history before subject. “Women’s history” will reference the study of women’s experiences.

As noted above, the commemoration of women’s history originally focused on celebrations during the week of March 8, in honor of International Women’s Day. In 1987, encouraged by the growing popularity of public and educational events, federal legislation designated a month-long celebration. Through the dissertation, references to “Women’s History Month” will encompass the whole movement, including when the goal was a week’s celebration rather than a month.

This work focuses on “practicalities.” Informed by my studies of gender and feminist theory, I define practicality as the interplay between actual experiences and the intended or expected outcomes. Like History, practicalities consider both benefits and challenges of actions without signifying complete success or absolute failure. Practicalities shift theories or ideas into action. To this end, I examine the in/between space, the tensions, ironies, and contradictions that arise from the creation of Women’s History Month as a national commemoration. While the celebration is representative of achievement, its commemoration also confirmed women’s continued political, economic, and cultural inequality.

These definitions highlight the inconsistencies inherent in history. The following chapters will attempt to contextualize and problematize the commemoration of Women’s History Month, recognizing both the benefits and the challenges. Chapter 1 surveys the historical context that history applies to women, and vice versa. The chapter will detail the methodological development of Women’s History as a field of study that recognized women as historical actors rather than (sometimes inconvenient) subjects. Chapter 2 examines the

coalition building that informed participants in the establishment of a national Women's History Month. Chapter 3 scrutinizes the impact of the implementation of National Women's History Month. Aimed at expanding knowledge of women's history as an educational equity project, the annual celebration quickly included political, economic, and cultural debates. In Chapter 4, I examine the details of the legislative process effect the establishment of Women's History Month. Changes in political administration policy on education, informed by anti-feminist backlash lead to conflicts. Chapter 5 shifts my perspective to a practical inquiry of the cultural reactions to Women's History Month, informed by the use of women and women's history in popular culture. Utilizing an extensive historiography of memory studies, Chapter 6 studies the development of a collective narrative. Through the reliance on the establishment of women's history scholarship and cultural traditions, the subject of women's history becomes susceptible to universalized representations, mimicking traditional, androcentric History. Chapter 7 utilizes feminist theory to analyze the effectiveness of Women's History Month commemorations as a site of historical agency: having the power to support women's history as a subject affected by resistance, critique, and theory.

The more effort women put into becoming part of the political and culturally established power structures, the more entrenched patriarchal institutions seem to remain. Political parties challenge equity measures by either ignoring legislation or minimally funding programs. Businesses hire women employees in greater numbers, often at less pay, while corporations continue to exclude women from positions of prestige and authority. History, as an academic discipline, maintains an overwhelmingly white male professorate, despite significant increases of female students, at all educational levels, and the stellar scholarship of

women's historians that add women's experiences to historical narratives. Celebrated and studied year round, no one questions the presence of white male protagonists in history, or questions their portrayal as powerful identities.

More than a convenient slogan to define an annual acknowledgement of more than half of the world's population, Women's History Month indelibly intertwines with the institution of History, as a practice that catalogues places, times, identities, and traditions within politics and culture. My analysis of Women's History Month relies on the coalitions of these spaces: as much for how they connect as the potential left unfulfilled. In *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, Judith Bennett noted that in the 1970s, feminist historians "spoke easily and readily about patriarchy; today we do not."<sup>6</sup> Bennett blamed two factors: first, a silencing by a discipline of History that minimizes women's oppression as minor; second, compliance by women to this characterization. The commemoration of Women's History Month sits in this critical space. Interpreted as a symbol of empowerment, the commemorative month nevertheless sustains a larger exclusion from power by cataloguing women's experiences and achievements into thirty-one days rather than 365. This dissertation seeks to challenge this unwitting marginalization. The work of women's historians and coalitions developed extensive opportunities to challenge a patriarchal ideology that subordinates women. A useful tool, Women's History Month, offers a powerful incentive to expand knowledge and amplify women's political, economic, and social power.

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): 155.

## CHAPTER I

### THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S HISTORY METHODOLOGY: WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AS A STEP TOWARDS LEGITIMACY

#### Methodology and Women's History: What is a Woman?

French feminist Simone de Beauvoir is famous for her claim, "One is not born, but, rather becomes a woman."<sup>7</sup> While interpretations of this quote vary, I understand de Beauvoir's claim as a statement that cultural expectations of gender configure "woman," based on her physical sex, which then informs how she is understood and treated. As de Beauvoir noted in her explanation of womanhood, "If I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman;' on this truth must be based all further discussion."<sup>8</sup> However, man need not define himself as an individual of a certain sex. "Man" is the default; the neutral; the objective. Woman is always the subject in contrast, "the contrariness" to man, defined by her relationship to man.<sup>9</sup>

In writing about the history of women, de Beauvoir's explanation of the mechanics of womanhood guides my analysis. I agree with de Beauvoir's appraisal that woman's subordination to man was solidified by historical development as "the Other."<sup>10</sup> Not a natural

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<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 267.

<sup>8</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. xv.

<sup>9</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xvi.

<sup>10</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 267.

occurrence, women's secondary status developed over time because of social, political, and economic conditions that institutionalized men's value over women. While the relationship between women and men remained reciprocal due a reliance on one another, women's capabilities, desires, and experiences suffer sustained explanation by and through men.

What impact does this have on women's history? Again, I quote de Beauvoir, who stated, "He is the subject, he is the Absolute. She is the Other."<sup>11</sup> As the default, the experiences of men act as the standard of history, the method of measuring value. This creates a double bind for histories of women.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, women's history brings legitimacy to the complex and diverse experiences of women. Women's history acts as a methodology that pivots on "woman" as the source of identity. However, this gendered identification also sustains a dichotomy, by continuing to contrast woman with man. While the division may not intend to be oppositional, the gender binary reinforces difference.

Others echo De Beauvoir's scrutiny of sex and history. In *Woman as a Force in History* (1947), historian Mary Ritter Beard, cited a 1908 address by Dr. M. Carey Thomas to the North American Woman Suffrage Association: "Women are one-half of the world but until a century ago the world of music and painting and sculpture and science was a man's world. The world of trades and professions and of work of all kinds was a man's world. Women lived a twilight life, a half-life apart, and looked out and saw men as shadows walking. It was a man's world. The laws were man's laws, the government a man's government, the country a man's

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<sup>11</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xvi.

<sup>12</sup> Double bind, defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary: a difficult situation in which whatever action is taken, unpleasant results occur.

country.”<sup>13</sup> Beard also detailed a long history of women scholars (most not institutionally trained) that addressed the “woman question.” Dr. Elizabeth K. Adams, editor of “A Cyclopedia of Education,” compiled a history of women’s education circa 1930s. Mrs. Emily James Putnam, scholar of Greek history recognized woman’s “incontrovertible fact of physical subjection” to men that “affected her both physically and psychologically.” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writing extensively on the necessity for woman’s emancipation, argued that education and economic independence were fundamental to women’s freedom, especially in dismantling biological arguments/factors in subordination. Dr. Olga Knopf, addressed the perceived “psychiarised communal neurosis” of female subordination that passed generationally from mother to daughter, arguing, “The outer limitations to women’s progress are caused by the fact that we are living in a man’s culture.” Dr. Maude Glasgow stated in her 1940 book *The Subjection of Women and the Traditions of Men*: “For more than 6000 years the history of women has been one of hopeless sadness. She moved only to the clank of chains, and her vain desire for better and higher things could not find expression, for woman was by force of circumstances inarticulate.” In addition, Beard noted how war experiences shifted perceptions of women’s capabilities/capacities, citing Mildred McAfee, president of Wellesley College, who took a leave of absence during World War II to head the Women Accepted for Voluntary Services (WAVES). Her Navy experience proved to McAfee that “people were more important than men or women.” Placed into an environment that removed gender limitations, “women are women,

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Ritter Beard, *Woman as a Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1947): 21.



and men are men, and each individual in each category emerges into individuality out of all kinds of generalizations about the groups to which he or she belongs as a man or woman.”<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Beard exposed a “long view” of history predicated on masculine philosophical thought, referencing Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, and Oswald Spengler, who unanimously declared the sentiment that “all history proves” men as the placeholders of history.<sup>15</sup> In his theory of history as the biography of the Great Man, Carlyle (1795-1881) asserted that universal (in the context of patriarchal androcentric) history, “is the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the history of the Great Men who have worked here.” In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel (1770-1831) tied history to the progression of the consciousness of freedom. Based on his theory of the hierarchy of nature, or “the order of the cosmos,” Hegel posited that only man is capable of rational thought, which creates self-consciousness and a sense of subjectivity (or awareness of his place in society). Man’s self-consciousness acts as the key to identity, enabling recognition of oneself as both a part of and separate from civil society. In this respect, Man is responsible for the progression of consciousness. Yes, one can argue that Hegel uses “man” as the universal, as the default. However, a favorite Hegel quote belies this argument: “Women are educated - who knows how? - as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than acquiring knowledge. The status of men act, women receive. Manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of

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<sup>14</sup> Beard, *Woman as a Force in History*, 21-39.

<sup>15</sup> Beard, *Woman as a Force in History*, 270-1.

thought and much technical exertion.”<sup>16</sup> This is exactly the point I am making about history: men define history and men define women, particularly the access and roles allowed to women in history. Marx (1818-1883) recognized history as a “matter/marker” of class struggles or the struggle between access to “material possessions and power” and oppression. Marx tied history to the rise of capitalism, the material conditions that determined one’s life. Marx also acknowledged that only revolution of the oppressed, the proletariat, would shift history.

As Beard noted, “The dictum of history as the work of a few masculine human beings had gone forth to the corners of the earth and there given vitality to a doctrine of history as all man-made in a “man’s” world.”<sup>17</sup> This understanding of history is repeats routinely, practiced in education and politics, in public and private acknowledgements, through media sources and conversations, often without question.

Twenty-first century students of history rarely learn to question the philosophical roots of history. Instead, contemporary students of history learn methodologies of historical materialism and objectivity. Students of history are taught to question the view of long history that traces various stages of civilization, to notice patterns, to outline these patterns into some contextual reference, albeit minimally. In *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (1988), Peter Novick recognized historical materialism as an interpretation of society that “does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of

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<sup>16</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, quoted by Linda R. Williams, “Happy Families? Feminist Reproduction and Matrilineal Thought,” *American Women’s Fiction, 1790-1870*, ed. Barbara A. White (Routledge: New York, 2012), 48.

<sup>17</sup> Beard, *Woman as a Force*, 271.

interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.”<sup>18</sup> While Novick considered objectivity a goal, as well as a plan of action, the dilemma remains. History, as a subject matter based largely on physical or written sources, becomes a canon that only reflects the questions asked of the available evidence. Therefore, the objectivity of historical material becomes untenable when ignored, devalued, and/or destroyed.<sup>19</sup>

In response to Novick’s claims of objectivity, historian Hilda Smith argued that women historians deserved credit for developing the fields of social history and women’s history. While his text detailed the evolution of male professional history and historians through their privileged college and university positions, Novick overlooked the extensive women’s scholarship and professional training that largely developed due to involvement in political movements and causes, or at smaller women’s colleges, rather than large, prestigious universities.<sup>20</sup> Novick’s objective ideal of history invoked a universal by arguing that writing a history that reflected every experience of every event was difficult, if not impossible.

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), citing Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, (1858).

<sup>19</sup> In defending his position on objectivity taken in *That Noble Dream*, Novick later responded that “‘the objectivity question’ was based on what historians think they are doing in writing history, the ways of thinking about the “products” presented, and claims made on the behalf of the product.” Novick acknowledged that, in essence, the objectivity question he posed considered the who, what, when of a historians work, rather than the why (methodology). In his clarification of the intent of his book, Novick cited a practice of “tolerant pluralism,” given the sustained climate of academic conservatism. (Peter Novick, “My Correct Views on Everything,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (June 1991): 700.

<sup>20</sup> Hilda Smith, “A Prize-Winning Book Revisited - Women Historians and Women’s History: A Conflation of Absence,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 134.

Informed by the cultural turn of academics in the early 1970s, historians began to take a more methodological approach to history.<sup>21</sup> Historiographic revisions questioned the methods and principles used to establish and disseminate historical knowledge. Interdisciplinary studies introduced different voices with varied claims to truth. Historians of women countered with methodologies that treated history as a theory, rather than a science. Historical narratives became evidence for the varied roles of gender, race, social class, sexuality, etc. Supported by Marxist theorists of the 1970s, historical narratives developed that considered social progress in relation to material progress (production and technology advances). Marxist feminists and historians used historical materialism as a method to include women in the fabric of history. Despite this, the demarcation of separateness continued, as methodologies of history sustained an institutional foundation of “woman is history, but man makes history.”<sup>22</sup> What developed was a “add women and stir” practice. Casual references to women in history classes, textbooks, or documentaries focused on their roles as wives and mothers, or as the first to achieve success in a traditionally male endeavor. This “add women and stir” strategy created an illusion of comprehensiveness only. The superficial and symbolic references did not tangibly change the existing historical narratives or address existing inequalities created by prior exclusion of women’s involvement in history.

Informed by the feminist movement, classes and academic programs dedicated to the study of women’s history formed, as women’s history became an established academic field. Well represented at historical and women’s studies conferences, women’s history began to

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<sup>21</sup> While a method designs the process of research, a methodology directs the research, using systemic theoretical analysis.

<sup>22</sup> Beard, *Woman as a Force*, 272, quoting Oswald Spengler *Aphorisms* (Washington D.C.: Henry Regner Company, 1967).

influence and reinterpret traditional historical narratives previously centered solely on men. The process of building women's history into a vibrant and respected field relied heavily on feminist theories. Historian Sue Morgan argued that any narrative was a formulation of a specific point of view or epistemology; as a result, "all history writing is therefore intrinsically theoretical because it cannot escape being artificially organized."<sup>23</sup> While narratives supported by research and archival sources add historical and political context, the narrative is also the product of the historian's point of view. By providing a framework for understanding the resulting discourse, theory disrupts the historian's point of view. As such, theory becomes a method of rigorous debate. The critical analysis that results benefits both history and historians by adding more layers to the narratives and dismantling presumptions of historical value.

Feminism, with its focus on establishing cultural, political, economic, and philosophical equality between women and men relies on history for validation. Feminist theory has long questioned historical presumptions of who and what constitutes value in historical discourse, by re-examining categories, questions, and frameworks of history and decentralizing "man" as the marker of history.<sup>24</sup> Using various feminist theories, a feminist methodology claimed that women have historically been disadvantaged as a group in comparison to men, as well as the conviction that the disadvantages that afflict women are of human origins and can be changed by human actions. This feminist methodology places women's experiences in parity with

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<sup>23</sup> Sue Morgan, "Writing Feminist History: Theoretical Debates and Critical Practices," *Feminist History Reader*, ed. Sue Morgan (New York: Rutledge, 2006), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sue Morgan, "Writing Feminist History," 4. While the feminist movement sparked political and social change, so did the civil rights movement, the labor movement, the lesbian and gay movement. Women active in these events did not all claim to be feminists, yet they were actively writing history that reflected a feminist methodology.

men's, helping history to become an umbrella term for human experience rather than one determined by an patriarchal androcentric discourse.

Through history, women are shown to be agents, actors, and subjects in the making of history, vibrantly involved in events, times, and places marked as significant. While feminist theories take multiple approaches - socialist, Marxist, Black, radical, liberal, lesbian, cultural, poststructural, and postcolonial - the practice of feminist theory consistently destabilizes categories.<sup>25</sup> Here, feminist theory is in line with the strategies of women's history, in challenging the categorization and representation of women in history. While feminist theory is not the foundation of all women's history, modern narratives of women's history do undeniably reflect the agenda of feminist theory: to dismantle the hierarchal nature of gender categories.

### Becoming Strategic Agents of History

The scholarship of women's history troubles the normative politics of History. The separation between private and public spheres, the distinctions between the "ordinary" and the disruptive, and the hierarchal privilege that maintains a man/woman binary are exposed as fallacies - or at least, problematic. Women's history details the experiences of women as agents and subjects, intimately involved in the process of history. Asking, "What did women have to do with history," changes history by challenging the consensus view of history, in which historical discourse follows a generally agreed upon interpretation of time, space, and value. As

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<sup>25</sup> Morgan, "Writing Feminist History," 4.

Steven G. Smith noted in his essay, “Historical Meaningfulness in Shared Action,” history subjected to outside influences also recognizes shifts in ethical, political, religious, metaphysical, scientific, and aesthetic ideologies.<sup>26</sup> History then becomes a compilation of information that preserves adaptability as an important quality.

One has only to engage in a historical commemoration like Women’s History Month or enter a museum to experience how the material relationship to other agents of history creates value. Before the 1960s, women were rarely the placeholders that marked legal, economic, social, political, and/or philosophical histories. In a 1950 radio address, Beard reflected on a January 29, 1945 *Life* magazine editorial statement on the contemporary women’s movement, which stated: “Of all the social revolutions now abroad in the world, that of the American women is the least dynamic, the least predictable, the most aimless and divided - in short, the most feminine.” The editors of *Life* viewed women as “ridiculous,” and “obstacles to their own advancement,” because they had “forgotten how women helped to create America and brought their sex worldwide prestige.”<sup>27</sup> Forgotten? Or, never learned?

In the same radio address, Beard listed multiple references to women’s roles in history: as leaders, warriors, traders, philosophers, activists, government officials, scientists, economic leaders, and influential educators. Women played major roles and supporting roles in history, ruling countries and economies, influencing manufacturing and agriculture. Shrines were built to her “nature,” in honor of peace and war, patriotism and aggression.<sup>28</sup> Women owned land,

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<sup>26</sup> Steven G. Smith, “Historical Meaningfulness in Shared Action,” *History and Theory* (2009), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ann J. Lane, “Radio Address, 1950,” *Mary Beard: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ann Lane (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 195.

<sup>28</sup> Lane, “Radio Address,” 196.

managed wealth and property, traded and enslaved other women.<sup>29</sup> Women's writing was the basis of Greek philosophy and a liberal arts education. In religious movements, women acted as priestesses and were worshipped as goddesses. Both women and men were active in the development of scientific knowledge, resulting in the revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment Age: that the use of reason furthered civilization.<sup>30</sup> Beard lamented that in spite of available documentation of women's agency throughout history, the "lack of such knowledge by our women of women's historic force is now giving play for educators, in increasing numbers, to cry for the restriction in the education of our American high school girls and college women to home responsibilities."<sup>31</sup> Women's insulation from their own history impelled them "to become little women on the mental level of children."<sup>32</sup>

Beard posited that without knowledge of women's history, women could do little more than complain about sex discrimination.<sup>33</sup> Beard feared that women learned to view themselves only through the eyes of men, without regard for the history of the idea of sex equality, the actual status of women, the impact of national and international forces, women's

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<sup>29</sup> Lane, "Radio Address," 197.

<sup>30</sup> Lane, "Radio Address," 198.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, "Radio Address," 199.

<sup>32</sup> Lane, "Radio Address," 198.

<sup>33</sup> Beard developed a syllabus based on an extensive critique of the 1940s era *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The syllabus was 53 pages long and detailed several potential areas of study, many developed later by Women's Studies and History scholars.



autonomy, or ability to determine their own identity.<sup>34</sup> Beard believed that theory and historical practice were both necessary to develop a balanced education. By emphasizing men over women in history, women became a “lost sex,” subsumed and understood only by men’s interpretations of them as subjects connected to the home.<sup>35</sup> While women had willingly engaged in caretaking of the home, their roles in history became limited to this, interpreted in the narrowest economic and political way possible; rather than learning their history, women studied “home economics.”<sup>36</sup> In effect, history became a “sex education,” with a discourse designed to prove man’s prowess and power, “as conceived in the mind of man.”<sup>37</sup>

As a practicing historian decades before the cultural turn in academics, Beard’s views advanced a necessary development of new ideas and approaches to scholarship.<sup>38</sup> Women working as historians in the 1960s and 1970s focused their work on historiographic revisions, re-examining social histories by taking a “bottom-up” approach that emphasized the stories and experiences of the “common people” as quantifiable sources of information on social structures (classes, movements, families, work, leisure, revolutions, religions, industrialization, etc.). Historians of women’s experiences and feminist activists also worked to expose the gendered discrimination of women, using feminist theories to complicate a binary system that privileged

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<sup>34</sup> Ann J. Lane, “A Changing Political Economy as It Affects Women,” *Mary Beard: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ann Lane (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 203. Note the use of “sex,” here. This terminology changes in the late 1980s to “gender,” through the influence of feminist theory.

<sup>35</sup> Lane, “A Changing Political Economy,” 204-5.

<sup>36</sup> Lane, “A Changing Political Economy,” 205.

<sup>37</sup> Lane, “A Changing Political Economy,” 207. Beard cited the post-World War II reconstruction of society as a depression of feminism. The reliance on the institution of equal opportunity legislation was not enough to create or support opportunity, especially with the overwhelming limitations placed on women’s work and aspirations.

<sup>38</sup> Lane, “A Changing Political Economy,” 209.

men's experiences. By examining the sexism inherent in contemporary historical discourse, historians of women exposed the origins, foundations and workings of patriarchy. Through this scholarship, historians of women established arguments for the use of feminist theory as a methodology in the practice of both women's history and history, in general. Feminist theory combined analysis with context, challenging established narratives that upheld structures of inequality. By deconstructing political, economic, and social barriers present in historical narratives, avenues to greater understanding of systems of power opened.

Historians of women identified patriarchy as the structure of power that relied on sexism, racism, and classism to define and legitimize all inequality and difference. Building on Beard's critique of patriarchy, Gerda Lerner argued: "When men discovered how to turn 'difference' into dominance they laid the ideological foundation for all systems of hierarchy, inequality, and exploitation...This invention of hierarchy can be traced and defined historically: it occurs everywhere in the world under similar circumstances, although not at the same time."<sup>39</sup> As a result, even with the edification of feminist theory, Women's History evolved into a category of History, labeled as something a part of, but still other, than History. This catalogued "women" as exceptional, different, and/or unequal. As Lerner noted in the early 1970s, "The term 'Women's History' calls into question the claim to universality which 'History' generally assumes as a given."<sup>40</sup> Much like the use of "man" or "men" as a generic signifier representing the measure of all things, "history" acted as the collective pronoun for all

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<sup>39</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Reconceptualizing Differences among Women," *Journal of Women's History* (Winter 1990): 108.

<sup>40</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), xiii.

people.<sup>41</sup> Determined to challenge the androcentric suppositions of history, Lerner fought to move past histories of women that focused overwhelmingly on women's oppression and the struggle for women's rights. While further discussion and documentation of these events remains necessary, Lerner chose to focus her questions on women's understanding of the world, the actions taken within social movements, and/or the appropriateness of traditional periodization. Lerner also expanded her research to include different races and classes of women, honoring a diversity of experience as a result.

As a theoretical strategy, Women's History legitimized women as agents of history: Lerner, like Beard, recognized that a portrayal of women as victims only furthered the subjugation of women in history by marginalizing their experiences and actions. Certainly, Women's History had to begin with generalizations of women's history - oppression, subordination, contributions, compensations - all framed through the historical placeholder of "man." Doing so entered women into the narrative begun by men. Slowly, as scholarship and public awareness evolved through events like Women's History Month, narrative of women shifted from anonymity to participants, gaining agency. However, placing women into existing histories did not dissolve oppression or otherness, did not halt exploitation, racism, or classism, and did not dismantle the patriarchal hierarchy on which contemporary history rested. Instead,

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<sup>41</sup> Beard cites a 1850 British Parliamentary Law known as Lord Romilly's or Lord Brougham's Act, that explicitly states: "words importing the masculine gender shall always include women, except where otherwise stated" While historians generally acknowledge that women had an active role in the making of history, many contemporary historical texts and courses do not address women's roles in history except in a cursory manner. A more detailed study of the frequency in which this continues to occur is out of the scope of this paper, but significant enough to be readily apparent by looking at textbook content, syllabi, and lesson plans.

a compensatory history developed.<sup>42</sup> Women remained in the category of “different,” perhaps as notable as men in some cases, but subject to interpretation in terms of “man,” still.

Southern women’s historian Elsa Barkley Brown perceived African American culture as a resource to further reconceptualize difference. Noting that social structure must adhere to limits of cultural understanding, Brown posited that the asymmetrical nature of African American culture, illustrated through art, music, and literature that offer multiple rhythms and/or styles mixed together, added just the chaos needed to uproot intellectual and political space, as “the beauty of gumbo ya ya is that everyone talks at once.”<sup>43</sup> Brown supported the creation of histories in which discourse was simultaneous, giving context to the many conversations that occur in dialogue and in opposition to each other.<sup>44</sup> While many women’s historians claimed to address and include difference in the analysis of history, Brown claimed that the recognition of difference also reaffirmed a traditional silencing of others. Brown’s work on citizenship and the rights of 19th and early 20th century women illustrated that it was not enough to acknowledge that women live different lives. White women and women of color live different lives, as do women of different social class, and/or sexuality, belying patriarchal hierarchies. Women live the lives they do *as a result of* the way other women live.<sup>45</sup>

Brown acknowledged that the “women” of women’s history identified overwhelmingly as white middle-class heterosexual Christian women, reinforcing the norm and the privilege of

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<sup>42</sup> Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 146.

<sup>43</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here?’ The Politics of difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics.” *Feminist Studies* 18 (Summer 1992), 296.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here?’” 298.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here?’” 298.

traditional history. Attaching deviance to “other” women without questioning privilege duplicated historical constructions of difference and oppression. The fear of difference contextualized the loss of what Brown termed “the voice of gender,” noting, “gender does not have a voice; women and men do.”<sup>46</sup> With the extended history of subjugation and silencing experienced by women of color in the United States, the intersection of race and class dismissed the possibility of a universal women’s voice. Recognizing that “race (and yes gender, too) is at once too simple an answer and at the same time a more complex answer than we have yet begun to make it,” Brown posited that multiple layers and asymmetrical narratives of history prompted a nonlinear experience that constructs a more complex understanding of difference and of history.<sup>47</sup>

As late as the 1980s, students interested in the history of women needed to reference alternative academic disciplines to locate women’s narratives.<sup>48</sup> Historian Anne Firor Scott remembered reading women’s biographies in her undergraduate studies in the 1930s. As the traditional placeholders of historical narrative, men maintained agency. Their validity was unquestioned. As a graduate student, Scott noted that history instructors (mostly male) “treated history and culture as disembodied and disconnected,” a space and subject in which women were not allowed. Women’s memoirs went unrecognized as history, not widely published. Scott dated her decision to write women’s history to 1944, recalling the goal to

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<sup>46</sup> Brown, “What Has Happened Here?” 302.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, “What Has Happened Here?” 306.

<sup>48</sup> Anne Firor Scott, Sara Evans, Susan Cahn, and Elizabeth Faue, “Women's History in the Millennium: A Conversation across Three 'Generations': Part I,” *Journal of Women's History* (Spring 1999): 13. Elizabeth Faue developed her interest in women’s history by reading Emma Goldman, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich’s historical poem “From an Old House in America,” in an undergraduate English class.

discover and recover forgotten heroines, rather than detail the contributions of women who subsidized “important” male narratives of history.<sup>49</sup>

Subsequent generations of women’s historians also acknowledged that it was necessary to learn to think about women as agents of history. Southern historians of women in the 1980s and 1990s were among the first to point out that women experienced more than gender discrimination, developing intersectional histories of gender, race, socioeconomics, and sexuality. Women’s history and women’s studies courses that became available in the mid-1970s supported the study of identity politics that affected women’s lives. As historian Sara Evans recalled, “The personal is political and good history made good politics.”<sup>50</sup> In addressing the influence of the early 1960s feminist movement on her study of women’s history, Evans stated, “I believed that a movement which told women they could and should make history had to have a history to stand on and build from.”<sup>51</sup> This was a common goal of women’s historians and feminists (as well as Civil Rights and gay and lesbian activists): a reconceptualization of history that made it possible for women to view themselves as persons, actors capable of affecting the world. Recognition of agency turned women into political actors, from subjects without power to agents of power.

While patriarchal narratives of history struggled with implementing diversity, women’s history practiced inclusion when addressing race. In *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970), Anne Firor Scott examined the role of Southern women from

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<sup>49</sup> Scott, et al., “Women's History in the Millennium,” 12.

<sup>50</sup> Scott, et al., “Women's History in the Millennium,” 18.

<sup>51</sup> Scott, et al., “Women's History in the Millennium,” 19.

antebellum times to post-suffrage. From her viewpoint as a women's historian writing in the second wave, Scott identified the traditional narrative of the idealized white Southern woman as demure, cultured, and obedient as a fallacy.<sup>52</sup> When her male colleagues derided this research as "female chauvinism," Scott responded that history benefitted from knowledge of social reality, period.<sup>53</sup> Scott's work strengthened second wave scholarship that focused on examining women's involvement in political and social activism, particularly in the areas of abolition, suffrage, and education, as moves towards establishing equality and civil rights. Scott also challenged the frequent exclusion of raced perspectives from second wave scholarship, by illustrating the south as a diverse population. This work set a precedent for other second and third wave scholars of race and the intersection of gender and race.

Although Lerner was one of the first women's historians to address black women's contributions to history in her 1972 anthology, *Black Women in White America*, she later acknowledged the limiting effects of scholarship based on contribution history. Such histories resulted in implicit racism, "that conflated 'woman' with 'white woman.'"<sup>54</sup> Lerner prompted scholars of women from all disciplines to embrace the "differences of women" that evolved from the second wave feminist framework.<sup>55</sup> Building on Scott and Lerner's earlier work, Carol Berkin's *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (1996) included Native American and

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<sup>52</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 229.

<sup>53</sup> Scott, *The Southern Lady*, xii.

<sup>54</sup> Gerda Lerner, "U.S. Women's History: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Women's History* 16.4 (Winter 2004): 13.

<sup>55</sup> Lerner, U.S. Women's History, 12.

African American women in her survey of colonial women's lives.<sup>56</sup> Berkin's interdisciplinary approach blends history with ethnography, reflecting third wave theories that complicated identity and examined the intersectional nature of women's lives. Berkin reflected on the important economic, political, and cultural roles held by Native American and African American women throughout history, using the story of New England Native American leader, Wetamo, and others, to illustrate intersectionality.<sup>57</sup>

By documenting the role of black women in Civil Rights organizations, women's historians complicated masculine-centered narratives and validated the effectiveness of organized public actions. JoAnn Gibson Robinson's 1987 memoir of the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 illustrated the interplay between first wave interests in enfranchisement and the second wave investments in organization, by demonstrating the extensive efforts of black women in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>58</sup> Just as Robinson and the Women's Political Council (WPC) sought the integration of blacks into white society, women's history prized diversity in women's experiences, but also validated the unique experiences of race. The flexible leadership of the WPC and the well-organized bus boycott proved women's ability to work together on a common cause, highlighted by the investments of second wave theories on citizenship interests: marriage rights, voting, and the actions of community organizations, as a means of gaining equality.<sup>59</sup> Yet, women's history documented black women's recognition that

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<sup>56</sup> Carol Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1997), 202.

<sup>57</sup> Berkin, *First Generations*, 52.

<sup>58</sup> JoAnn Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 44.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 60.



equality was not universal. For women of color, the struggle to obtain freedom preceded the fight for equality.

The field of Southern women's history recognized race as an essential component of historical study. The experience of black women bound by slavery contrasted greatly from that of white women. Regardless of the historical period, class, region, ethnicity, and religious differences intensified the economic, political, and social freedoms experienced by different races. In her 1994 essay, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths: The Status of Slave Women during the Era of the American Revolution," Jacqueline Jones used the example of family life as a site of comparison.<sup>60</sup> While both were involved in the formation of churches, schools, and cultural societies, these organizations remained separated by race.<sup>61</sup> In addition, while Revolutionary era whites enjoyed stable family ties, black women's experiences as wives, mothers, and workers remained wholly dependent upon the whims of their owner's goodwill. Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck also demonstrated how the call for equality was absent from the interests of colonial and revolutionary New England enslaved women in their text, *Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (2010). Instead, the goal was freedom: to define legal self-ownership, to own property, to practice Christianity, and freedom for their

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<sup>60</sup> Jacqueline Jones, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths: The Status of Slave Women during the Era of the American Revolution," in *Half Sisters of History: Southern Women and the American Past* edited by Catherine Clinton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 18.

<sup>61</sup> Jones, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths," 31.

family.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, the feminist framework focused on freedom from patriarchal institutions like slavery and marriage as key to women's freedom.<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, in her 2004 text, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movement in America's Second Wave*, Benita Roth also argued for a more nuanced recognition of "feminisms" capable of interacting within the feminist framework. Roth noted that the racial or ethnic characteristics experienced by women influenced the practice of feminism, as did socioeconomic class.<sup>64</sup> The media "white-washing" of feminism created the illusion of exclusivity.<sup>65</sup> With minimal exception, the race and class privilege of those in the media spotlight became the face of the movement, their actions publicized and given historical significance. Homogeneous ethnohistories of early Native American women focused on the experiences of a select few Iroquois and Cherokee examples to create an identity in opposition to patriarchy.<sup>66</sup> By incorporating gender theories to re-examine the biases and assumptions of archival sources of earlier Native American history, women's historians challenged the constructed identity of the Native American woman. In addition, recognizing that colonization shifted the political rights, economic responsibilities, and individual freedoms of both genders,

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<sup>62</sup> Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>63</sup> Adams and Pleck, *Black Women*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movement in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Rebecca Kugel and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, eds., *Native Women's History in Eastern North America before 1900: A Guide to Research and Writing* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xv.

Nancy Shoemaker encouraged historians to “expect ambivalence,” and to ask complex questions that moved beyond limited concepts of “women’s power.”<sup>67</sup>

The feminist framework of the second wave politicized the personal histories of women of color when doing so furthered the goals of the movement. In contrast, women’s historians contextualized these experiences by placing the histories into larger political and social struggles. Catherine Clinton’s 1994 essay, “Bloody Terrain: Freedwomen, Sexuality, and Violence During Reconstruction,” detailed how emancipation resulted in little change in the behavior of white supremacists who continued to exploit black women physically and sexually.<sup>68</sup> While penalties remained severe for people of color found guilty of the actual or perceived abuse of white women, penalties for whites harming blacks was minimal and rarely enforced.<sup>69</sup> In addition, black women were frequently regarded as promiscuous, a stereotype that hindered their economic and political efficacy.<sup>70</sup> Sara Evans’ essay on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) demonstrated how black women fought on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement, receiving beatings and incarceration. Yet, bound by the gender roles of 1960s society, few women acted as public spokespersons. Instead, women

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<sup>67</sup> Nancy Shoemaker, “The Rise or Fall of Iroquois Women,” in *Native Women’s History in Eastern North America before 1900: A Guide to Research and Writing*, edited by Rebecca Kugel and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, eds. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 303-306.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Clinton, “Bloody Terrain: Freedwomen, Sexuality, and Violence During Reconstruction,” in *Half Sisters of History: Southern Women and the American Past*, edited by Catherine Clinton, Catherine, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 137.

<sup>69</sup> Clinton, “Bloody Terrain,” 138.

<sup>70</sup> Clinton, “Bloody Terrain,” 142.

cleaned organization offices and did paperwork.<sup>71</sup> Deborah Gray White's *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894- 1994* (1999), illustrated that racialized gender politics were a sustained variable of political and social contention for black women, whether white feminists chose to acknowledge it or not. For example, Mary Church Terrell founded the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, to focus on increasing black women's leadership in temperance measures, suffrage, and politics. Adopting the motto, "Lifting As We Climb," leaders recognized the intersection of race, gender, and poverty, acknowledging that if they improved the condition of one condition, the situation for all would progress.<sup>72</sup>

Like lesbians and other women of color, black women activists recognized that their intersectional identities of race and gender frequently defied the politics of equality and identity on which the overall feminist wave model was based. In *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (2005), Kimberly Springer noted that black women's liberatory movements flourished in the political "cracks" between the civil rights movement and the feminist movement.<sup>73</sup> Racial discrimination within the feminist movement often subjugated the goals of black women activists, just as sexism limited recognition of women political power in the civil rights movement.<sup>74</sup> Using gender theories that tested constructions of power, Springer's text challenged a "hegemonic feminism," arguing that white feminism

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<sup>71</sup> Sara Evans, "Black Power: Catalyst for Feminism," in *Half Sisters of History: Southern Women and the American Past*, edited by Catherine Clinton, Catherine (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 224.

<sup>72</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black women in Defense on themselves, 1894- 1994* (New York: WW Norton and Co., 1999), 24.

<sup>73</sup> Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>74</sup> Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 44.

used writings like that of the Combahee River Collective to create a stereotypical identity that obscured the justice-based interests of black activists.<sup>75</sup> Recognizing that “black women were visible, but not on their own terms,” Springer detailed how different black women’s groups like the Third World Women’s Alliance, the National Black Feminist Organization, and the National Alliance of Black Feminists, used education, public statements, and a focus on liberation rather than equality with men to expand their feminist goals.<sup>76</sup> Springer also asserted that black feminists were the first activists to mobilize around the intersections of race, gender, and class, contradicting the universalizing rhetoric favored by feminism.<sup>77</sup>

Crystal Feimster argued that gendered and racialized history routinely made black women invisible, erasing their history of lynching, slavery, and sexual brutality.<sup>78</sup> Citing the extensive history of violence against black women that was largely unnoted in the public record, Crystal Feimster observed that as a result of the 1991 Anita Hill- Clarence Thomas controversy, Black women’s history and Southern women’s history scholars began to challenge the routine erasure of black women from history.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 88-9.

<sup>77</sup> Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Crystal N Feimster, “The Impact of Racial and Sexual Politics on Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 99 (2012): 823.

<sup>79</sup> For additional reading on the Hill-Thomas proceedings, see Barbara Brandon, Susan Watson, Patricia Coleman-Burns, and Margaret Walker Alexander’s *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995). For more on violence against women in the Jim Crow era, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Hannah Rosen’s *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), Nell Irvin Painter’s *Standing at Armageddon: A Grassroots History of the Progressive Era* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), and Glenda Gilmore’s *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Durham: University of North Carolina, 1996).

Historian Joan Wallach Scott made a lasting impression on the field of Women's History by acknowledging the impact of poststructuralist theory on her philosophy of social history. By rejecting the assumptions of a hierarchal organization of power based on a binary structure, poststructuralist theory allowed Scott to question professional and political identity: what multiple identities does a subject have - woman, mother, worker, race, ethnicity, class, citizen, activist? The implications of a narrow definition of the historical subject considered "the notion that categories of identity reflect objective experience seemed to lead to explanations that served more often to confirm than to challenge prevailing views about women."<sup>80</sup>

Characteristics attributed to women, as a class, construed a natural phenomenon rather than a social distinction. Framed by stereotypes, cultural expectations, and experiences, attributions that universalized women's experiences contained political motivations. While the extraordinary subject often framed historical discourse, the subject also remained framed by normative definitions. For example, students routinely recognize the names Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, and Sacajawea. However, the stories of these women contain information intended to prove a specific historical point of view that portrayed them as either exceptions to the patriarchal rule or willing participants. Scott argued that historical representations of women focused on women in relation to the normative of men, recognizing women's achievements only as a benefit to capital, government, and/or business. By

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<sup>80</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 4.

deconstructing these androcentric narratives, Scott challenged the reliance on hierarchies and binaries that privileged men's experiences over women.<sup>81</sup>

The use of feminist theory as a strategy to frame women's history transformed historical narratives. Recognized as the primary record of political, economic, and social power, traditional history identified, interpreted, and reinforced the stereotypes, expectations, and experiences that result in political biases. In contrast, the creation and maintenance of a separate category of history, marked exclusively for the record of women's history, reflected this history as an exception, open to interpretation and identifiably outside of the norm. Women's history transformed the identity of history using feminist theory as a methodology. Women's history becomes a symbolic representation of a particular history, one that has real, lived consequences for those culturally marked as "women," who remain separated from certain relations of power as a result of this distinction, or categorization.

### Amplifying Women's Voices

In her text, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, philosopher Nancy Fraser argued, "Politics requires a genre of critical theorizing that

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<sup>81</sup> Like Scott, feminist theorist Judith Butler posited a postfeminist point of view: a look beyond traditional constructions of identity to the site in which categories were removed. With the intent of questioning the construction of knowledge as truth, Butler's theoretical approach was to "trouble" gender. Troubling gender became a reversal of power, a revelation of the illusion of autonomy, since, "trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position," revealed as access to agency.<sup>81</sup> While Butler recognized the historical binary formation of sex/gender as a tradition and a politic, theoretically she sought to remove the signification of the relational terms, while continuing to maintain the distinctions.<sup>81</sup> Butler questioned the viability of "women" as the subject of inquiry, finding such use crucial for politics but ultimately exclusionary. Another feminist theorist, Eve Sedgwick, noted, "There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses." Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 27.

blends normative argument and empirical sociocultural analysis in a ‘diagnosis of the time.’”<sup>82</sup> Women’s history lives, even thrives, in this theoretical space. By supplying neglected historical details, women’s history often acts, consciously and unconsciously, as a counter to normative analyses of history that exclude or minimize the experiences of women and Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC). Women’s history provides details that shift, enhance, and sometimes dismantle established narratives. These changes (corrections?) frequently suffer assessment as political, interpreted as an activist agenda.

Fraser references Jurgen Habermas’s theory of social labor, that argued, “societies must reproduce themselves,” materially and symbolically.<sup>83</sup> Material reproduction regulates society by defining and instituting social practices; setting up norms. The institution of history takes a pragmatic approach, routinely utilizing normalized narratives and/or interpretations. Mass produced textbooks, distributed widely, reinforce stereotypes as historical explanations. Survey classes standardize information based on chronological timelines that use familiar teaching points: war, entrepreneurship, and an oft-repeated cast of historical figures. These figures become the symbols of history, offering a limited social narrative. Historians of women push against this narrative as being a conceptually inadequate and an overtly ideological, male-centered agenda. Academics focused on the history of women in the 1960s and early 1970s

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<sup>82</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>83</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 115. In addressing the gender subtext of Jurgen Habermas’s study of normative institutions, Fraser posited that without the inclusion of women, these male-dominated narratives remain stable, thus upholding material and symbolic interpretations of history (129).



faced perceptions of conducting “contribution history,” in order to prove that women were more than “adjuncts to history.”<sup>84</sup> Vestiges of this sentiment continue today.

Writing in 2015, historian Alice Kessler-Harris argued that history’s inclusion of women had yet to move significantly past an attitude of “so what,” a sentiment that underpins much of my own analysis. While contemporary textbooks do include references to women, few of these resources thoroughly examine how the experiences and/or actions of women affect history. While university courses may cite major events of women’s history like the suffrage movement or the 1970s women’s movement as notable, this information rarely offers context to other historical events of the period or to the progression of women’s history. Individual women may be recognized, yet their contributions are condensed, separated from the efforts of other women, and/or represented as helpmate to powerful men. Mostly, public media sources of women’s history portray seemingly rare events, disconnected from traditional, patriarchal narratives. The celebration of Women’s History Month justifies this minimization of women’s history in the same way as Black history too frequently becomes a focus only during Black History Month. In educational environments increasingly concerned with developing and implementing diversity requirements, the commemoration months provide seemingly simple resolutions that require minimal institutional change. As a result, students of history, as well as the casual observer, continue to repeat established understandings of politics, economics, religion, work...you name it. The institutionalization of history maintains exclusive historical knowledge, frequently one that does not ask questions of what is missing, misinterpreted (deliberately or not), or deemed important.

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<sup>84</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, “The So-What Question,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 36, no 1 (2015): 12.

Women are valuable historical agents capable of shifting the processes of history. As such, inclusion of women's experiences is necessary to the telling of history. The common methodologies of history manage this easily: chronological narratives, use of sources and evidence, and the contextualization of events. To talk about the history of women is to discuss much more than history as a narrative record of events. Hierarchies, patriarchy, privilege, power, oppression, misogyny: all come into play as relational questions. Yet, often, historians of women assume sole responsibility for untangling these conceptual problems. As Kessler-Harris noted, she, Gerda Lerner, and other historians of women working in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, responded to the addition of women to history as a means of "enriching knowledge," or becoming "smarter."<sup>85</sup> Lerner, in particular, sought to focus on "illuminating" information regarding women, seeking common threads of experiences across different races.<sup>86</sup>

The growing feminist consciousness of the early 1970s raised significant conceptual questions regarding the application of gender, race, and social class. Social histories, popularized in the late 1970s, offered a more comfortable fit for histories of women. Contemplations of labor practices, communities, economies, and racial differences included women. Minimally, but women were present. In addition, social history shifted thinking around source material, accepting a wider variety of sources. This framework is obvious in the curriculum of two women's history institutes, held at Sarah Lawrence College (NY) in 1977 and 1979, respectively. The first institute invited K-12 educators, with the purpose of developing curricula changes to expand representations of women taught in public schools. The 1979

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<sup>85</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "The So-What Question," 12.

<sup>86</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "The So-What Question," 13.

Institute focused on teaching women's history to members of national women's organizations. Attendees were also encouraged to create archives and develop additional educational programs. Women's History faculty from Sarah Lawrence College led both institutes. While successful in bringing public and academic interests together, the scale of the institutes' influence could not erase systemic inequality.

Gender remained political. In the late 1970s and beyond, social histories largely ignored the institutionalized discrimination faced by women as a result of gender: citizenship restraints, wage and education inequity, career limitations, lack of political efficacy, reproductive rights, etc. Women's history defined as social history placed women's experiences into historical context, but did little to shift larger historical narratives over the long term. Recounting a 1988 conference that brought together a majority of women's history graduate studies professors, Linda Kerber recalled a growing awareness of the impact on gender, race, and class on every subject addressed by history. Kerber attributed this cognizance to the historians' role of "looking for gaps, for unread documents, for opportunities."<sup>87</sup> Yet, historical work often remained within normative boundaries.

The commemoration of Women's History Month parallels History's gender boundaries. First celebrated as a weeklong event most often held at the local or state level, then federally recognized as a month long event in 1984, Women's History Month recognized the history of women as a useful concept to forward generic understandings of people, places, events, and social movements. However, the annual tribute created a placeholder for women's history as

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<sup>87</sup> Linda Kerber, "Why History Matters," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 36, no.1, (2015): 10.

an auxiliary history. Women's history remained in the gaps of history, seeking opportunities to become part of History, yet always adjunct, supplementary rather than essential.

### Conclusion

The public perception of history, the history focused on throughout the year in media, in education, in public spaces, largely reflects a traditional patriarchal focus. This history does not require a celebratory month-long demarcation, because it is the institutional umbrella of History. However, the implementation of commemorative months like Black History Month and Women's History Month have resulted in the evolution of History, creating gradual perceptual changes that recognize a more complex and diversified history.

For over forty years, Women's History Month has represented a public focus point for women's history, developing and disseminating information through libraries, education, and public events. Women's History Month has advertised the enormous impact of national and government organizations, as well as legislation (Title IX, National Women's History Project, Women's Equity Action League, National Organization for Women, to name a few), through the development of targeted educational material. Women's History Month builds on the work of women's history scholars, continuing to complicate and amplify the complexities of History. Women's History Month offers an opportunity to publicly honor and celebrate women's achievements and experiences. This is important and powerful. Yet, viewing Women's History Month as just a simple commemoration belies the complexity at its roots.

As a product of 1970s political and cultural activism, Women's History Month reflects a challenge to the long-term marginalization and exclusion of women from institutionalized

power. Culturally, as a once-a-year notation, Women's History Month reinforces the difference and unequal status of women, even as it celebrates the experiences of women. The celebration also underscores the problems faced by historians when writing and teaching women's history: how to make women the agent, actor, and subject of history, without recreating an androcentric perspective. The recognition that women are indeed persistently central to history remains important to both feminist theory and women's history. Overwhelmingly, the public perceives History, "real" history without an identifying subject, as ideologically neutral, while "women's history" frequently remains interpreted as politically motivated. The status quo of History has not significantly changed despite forty years of national Women's History Month celebrations. As an emblem of cultural acceptance, Women's History Month acts as an "easy out," a comfortable routine that sustains the limited inclusion of women in history.

The establishment of Women's History Month began as an aspiration, a target within reach. Enacted as a short-term goal without a long-range vision, what is missing from its history is a valuation of women's history and Women's History Month: an appraisal of quality, condition, and cost. This dissertation seeks to fill that gap.

## CHAPTER II

### COALITION BUILDING: A BENEFICIAL FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AND ACTIVISM

*"The absence of the history of women, something that every girl and woman in the United States is entitled to, is a very serious thing. We have learned from black people what it means to deny your history. What it means is not just that you have no role models, no heroines, but that you've been fed myths and lies about yourself. But it really affects the way in which you can think of what is possible and that's the most serious thing."*<sup>88</sup>

At its roots, the formal commemoration of national Women's History Month is the result of several coalitions. First, the feminist organizations represented by the Women's Action Alliance (WAA) collaborated with the Gerda Lerner-led Women's Studies faculty at Sarah Lawrence College, to increase awareness of women's history. Joined by the Women's Council of the Smithsonian Institution, the resulting Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History in 1979 acted as the conception point to expand the public practice of women's history. Second, the coalition that developed amongst the attendees of the Institute birthed the idea for Women's History Month, becoming caretakers of its growth into a national celebration. Third, a coalition of legislators, educators, and women's organizations nurtured the implementation of women's history into public policy and educational material. Despite increasing political backlash, this coalition worked to develop institutional support for increased gender equity. Finally, women's history scholars established valuable archives of information to

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<sup>88</sup> Gerda Lerner, Excerpt from Lerner's keynote address at the closing breakfast of the Women's History Institute, held at the Smithsonian., undated, 4, Women in History Projects: Coalitions: National Women's Agenda Project: Women's Agenda magazine: March/April 1979: Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

challenge patriarchal narratives and shift collective memory of women. In an unwitting coalition with memory studies scholars who redefined studies of material culture, collective narratives of gender (as well as race, social class, and sexuality) became spaces for historic growth.

This chapter focuses on the history of the activist coalitions that are foundational to developing the idea that became Women's History Month. From its foundation, Women's History Month reflected a coalition: a temporary alliance of distinct interests in support of joint actions. By examining the decade before participants gathered at the Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History, I seek to give context to why WAA executive director Abram and historian Lerner thought the development of public knowledge of women's history was important, as well as contextualize the moment in time that the Institute takes place. The historical circumstances under which the Women's History Institute developed inform the later implementation and use of Women's History Month.

The history of Women's History Month reflects a period commonly referred to as second wave feminism. I deliberately chose not to use this term as a descriptor for the activism that happened throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as I believe it to be reductive and exclusionary. Women's activism and women's history are continual. As Nancy Hewitt noted in her introduction to *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism*, despite the wide range of women who participated in feminist movements during the 1960s and 1970s, most studies of the second wave focus on "competing functions of liberal, socialist, and radical

feminists, which are presented as largely white and either middle-class or classless.<sup>89</sup> Reliance on the wave theory to interpret women's history can obscure many of the intersectional inequalities of gender, race, economics, politics, and sexuality.

A focus on coalitions is more productive in understanding the nuances of women's history. In *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, Stephanie Gilmore argued, "Coalitions were - and are - necessary when opponents of change mobilize."<sup>90</sup> Gilmore recognized that the histories of 1960s and 1970s social movements frequently undervalued the scope of women's activism for social and political change. Favoring "the women's movement" or "feminism" as the descriptor to encompass all forms of activism, traditional history marginalized the many organizations involved in a wide variety of actions to expand opportunities and dismantle exclusionary institutions.<sup>91</sup> However, coalitions targeted needed energy on issues, while also maintaining fluidity to adjust and negotiate responses. Coalitions brought women together: women that did not always think or act alike, or have the same goals. Allied, women (and the organizations they populated) recognized that fulfilling a common goal required assistance and cooperation.

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<sup>89</sup> Nancy Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 5. As Hewitt noted, the wave metaphor has frequently been used as a simplistic means of disseminating information about women's history to the public. Women's history scholars continue to reference and debate the usefulness of the wave metaphor in journal issues, books, and online.

<sup>90</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, "Strange Bedfellows: Building Feminist Coalitions Around Sex Work in the 1970s," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 266.

<sup>91</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 1.



## The Women's Action Alliance: Development of an Agenda

The plan to establish National Women's History Week (which would become a month-long celebration in 1984) generated from a small workshop held as part of the Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History in the summer of 1979. Attended by representatives of national women's organizations, facilitated by the Sarah Lawrence faculty, planned by WAA, and sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the Lilly Foundation, the Institute sought to build a coalition around developing and utilizing women's history resources. Establishment of a federally recognized national commemoration of women's history fulfilled this goal and represented a success in the larger political and social struggle for women's equality.

Throughout the 1970s, the Women's Action Alliance (WAA) was a major networking organization. Originating from a discussion between Gloria Steinem and Brenda Feigen Fasteau, WAA's intent was to build a coalition through which women and men could "confront sexist issues in their own communities," while avoiding the hierarchal organization structure that too frequently complicated progress.<sup>92</sup> Offering such a broad agenda relied heavily on the popular ideology of sisterhood: "the recognition that women are individuals with full rights to make choices affecting their lives."<sup>93</sup> Steinem wanted "sisters" in the WAA title, in honor of the interactive networking she favored. Feigen-Fasteau stressed the model of "action."

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<sup>92</sup> Brenda Feigen, *Not One of the Boys: Living Life as a Feminist* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 42. Note: In Cynthia Harrison's essay, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s," *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 23, included Dorothy Pitman-Hughes as a co-founder of WAA. Feigen does not mention Pitman-Hughes in her book.

<sup>93</sup> Cynthia Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s," in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 23.

Incorporated formally in 1972 as “Sisters: The Women’s Action Alliance,” most members referred to the new organization as simply “The Alliance.”<sup>94</sup>

Through the WAA, groups could connect from different areas of the United States on a wide range of issues, while becoming aware of how many problems were also universal racial and socioeconomic issues. Building an extensive network would facilitate legislative lobbying efforts at all levels of government. In support of this, WAA developed and distributed informational packets to coordinate the policy directives of over two hundred women’s organizations in the United States. Through its office in New York City, WAA coordinated the distribution of public relations advice, development of a library of materials on programs and issues affecting women, provided staff expertise and support, and programming guidance at state and local levels.

Steinem sought to structure the WAA as a non-hierarchical institution, while also taking advantage of advantageous funding sources. A January 1972 press release stated, “The Alliance will institutionalize and enlarge the kinds of services that many of us on the Board of Directors have found ourselves under more and more pressure to provide as we travel around the country, talking with women’s groups.”<sup>95</sup> The thirty-four person advisory board of WAA illustrated a distinct reliance on established emblems of political, economic, and cultural power for legitimacy. The primarily white, educated, middle/upper class, east coast roots of WAA’s board members represented an influential network, with some regard given to establishing gender and racial diversity. Prominent political and economic leaders like John Kenneth

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<sup>94</sup> Feigen, *Not One of the Boys*, 43. Note: While documents reference the Women’s Action Alliance interchangeably as WAA or The Alliance, I am choosing to use WAA exclusively to avoid confusion with other groups/institutions.

<sup>95</sup> Women’s Action Alliance, Press Statement, January 12, 1972, Sophia Smith Collection: Agents of Social Change Online: Women’s Action Alliance, <https://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/curriculum/waa1-3.jpg.html>, 1.

Galbraith, Richard N. Goodwin, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Phyllis Chesler, Edith Van Horn, Susan Sontag, and Patsy Mink joined Steinem and Feigen-Fasteau on the initial WAA board.

Intending for WAA to “put special emphasis on projects that allow women to maximize their chances for change by working together across the traditional boundaries of class, race, age, and ethnic group,” Steinem also invited several Black leaders to join the Board of Directors. Eleanor Holmes Norton (New York City’s Commissioner on Human Rights), Yvonne Braithwaite Burke (California Representative), Johnnie Tillmon (founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization), and Jane Galvin Lewis (founder of the National Black Feminist Organization) offered valuable connections to Black women’s organizations through their board advisory capacity.<sup>96</sup> The benefits of WAA’s prestigious foundation were reciprocal. Board member and Steinem’s close friend, Dorothy Pitman-Hughes recognized Steinem’s star-power as instrumental in attracting beneficial attention to Black concerns. For Pitman-Hughes, involvement in WAA coalitions offered Black women, “a way for us to talk with white women and find out how they were getting past these barriers.”<sup>97</sup> Notably, Pitman-Hughes and Steinem traveled together throughout the 1970s, speaking to community organizations about gender, race, and social class issues. Evidenced in an iconic 1971 photograph, Pitman-Hughes and Steinem’s genuine sisterhood portrays them standing side-by-side, arms raised defiantly in Black Power fists.

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<sup>96</sup> Press Statement, WAA, page 3.

<sup>97</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 23.

WAA's focus on information and networking building favored an organizational model based on relationships between allied interests, arguably a "feminine" institutional model that nevertheless relied on a hierarchy to achieve its goals. The Board of Directors generated influence and prestige through star power and valuable funding connections. Feigen-Fasteau served as "coordinating" director of WAA in 1971-72. Feigen-Fasteau oversaw WAA, with the assistance of Project Managers Catherine Samuels and Carol Shapiro.<sup>98</sup> Feigen-Fasteau's title of "coordinating director," of the WAA complied with Steinem's insistence that the organization must avoid developing a hierarchal structure in order to be effective. While preferring the title "executive director," Feigen-Fasteau acquiesced, in large measure out of practical respect for Steinem's fundraising abilities.<sup>99</sup>

Three weeks after announcing the establishment of WAA, Feigen left her directorship position to work with Rutgers professor (and later Supreme Court Justice) Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the ACLU's Women's Rights Project.<sup>100</sup> Former ACLU project director Ruth J. Abram led WAA

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<sup>98</sup> Despite being one of the founders and board member of WAA, Steinem was not active in the everyday running of the organization; she was busy developing Ms. Magazine. The idea for Ms. Magazine came from Steinem's desire for a newsletter to support communication and information sharing between WAA networking members. Feigen-Fasteau suggested a magazine format, then found journalists, writers, and funding sources willing to avoid the advertising complications that Steinem feared would limit or interfere in retaining feminist control of content. Positive response was overwhelming. At two standing-room only meetings, potential writers shared their frustration at rejections of feminist content by national magazines (Feigen, *Not One of the Boys*, 47). A power struggle between Feigen-Fasteau and publisher Elizabeth Forsling Harris quickly divided Ms. from direct association with WAA. As a result, Steinem and Forsling Harris managed Ms., while Feigen-Fasteau directed WAA. Forsling Harris had deep connections to the Kennedy family, an alliance favored by Steinem. Forsling Harris' involvement in Ms. ended in 1972, shortly after publication of the first issue, due to allegations of misconduct (drunkenness and bad debts). Despite receiving a generous buyout, Forsling Harris sued Steinem and Ms. for libel in 1978, after Ms. sold a sizable amount of shares to another publishing company (Elizabeth Forsling Harris, Plaintiff-appellee, v. Gloria Steinem, Patricia Carbine, and Ms. Magazine Corporation, defendants - appellants, 571F.2d.119 (2d Cir. 1978). The case was dismissed when Forsling Harris failed to appear.

<sup>99</sup> Feigen, *Not One of the Boys*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Grace Helen McCabe directed WAA from 1972-73, followed by Marlene Knauss (1973-74), Ruth Abram (1974-79), Arlie Scott (1979-82), Sylvia Kramer (1982-1991), Shazia Rafi (1991-93), Karen Amarath (1993-1997). In

during its formative and most productive years (1974-1979). During her five-year tenure as executive director, Abram set an ambitious programming plan, largely focused on expanding educational opportunities for women. Abram expanded WAA outreach through fundraising grants from corporations and developed the National Women's Agenda Coalition, Women at Work Fairs, and various Women's History initiatives.

As Cynthia Harrison noted in her essay, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s," from its inception, WAA represented an ambitious agenda complicated by two complimentary, yet opposing, factors. First, by combining and organizing resources, WAA intended to establish a unified ideological agenda that benefitted a large number of diverse women's organizations. Secondly, any agenda developed by the WAA would compete with the federal government's Commissions on Women, recently granted funding to establish a national women's conference to develop equity-based goals.<sup>101</sup>

WAA, as the umbrella under which dozens of women's organizations connected common goals, favored women deciding what issues affected their lives over any government-established objective. This large coalition could then apply pressure on the federal government to develop and fund equity programs for women. Organizations like the National Women's Political Caucus, the Girl Scouts, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Council of Negro Women, the Women's Equity Action League, and the Women's committee of the United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural

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August 1995, WAA's funding suddenly decreased by 65%, with only 30 days' notice, leaving little time to arrange for other sources. The over-reliance on New York State (governed by George Pataki) and New York City (Mayor - Rudy Guiliani) as a funding source ultimately proved fatal. WAA voted to dissolve in June, 1997.

<sup>101</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 19.

Implement Workers (UAW) had extensive membership lists and decades of organizational capabilities to build support for policy initiatives.<sup>102</sup>

Conversely, government policies shifted with the rise and fall of every administration. Government policy also influenced media, as well as state and local governments. Largely excluded from these institutional power sources, women's political efficacy fluctuated based on who held governmental power. Women's concerns experienced frequent obstruction and/or circumvention. Alternatively, when government aligned with feminist interests, women's goals benefitted from increased access to funding, staffing of programs, and production of material.

The WAA, self-described as "the only group available to bring together women's groups to coordinate a National Women's Agenda," sought to hold a national convention for organizations to develop policies and implementation plans.<sup>103</sup> Planning for this event took place throughout 1975, parallel to a similar proposal funded and managed by the appointees of the Ford administration. In May, WAA produced a draft of a national agenda, supported by over 100 women's organizations and caucuses, stating, "We are making explicit demands on our government and on the private sector as well. Firm policies and programs must be

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<sup>102</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 20.

<sup>103</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 20. WAA's National Women's Agenda "Plan of Action" was modeled after policies established by the 1946 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The UN Commission monitored global issues concerning women's rights in the areas of politics, economics, civil rights, and education. The fifteen founding members of CSW stated their goal as, "To raise the status of women, irrespective of nationality, race, language or religion, to equality with men in all fields of human enterprise, and to eliminate all discrimination against women in the provisions of statutory law, in legal maxims or rules, or in interpretation of customary law." Members of the CSW began to organize a global conference on women's rights in 1965, as a space to exchange ideas that would form the foundation for later action, set boundaries, define responsibilities, share information, and build global connections. The 1975 UN International Women's conference took ten years of effort to organize due to various international negotiations over funding, membership in Commission on the Status of Women, conference structuring, and debates over the inclusion of men to allay fears that "an all-woman conference would not be taken seriously." After overcoming a decade of obstacles, the Conference was finally held in Mexico City from June 19-July 2, 1975. (Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women," <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/CSW60YRS/index.htm>).

developed and implemented at all levels in order to eliminate those inequities that still stand as barriers to the full participation by women of every race and group.”<sup>104</sup> Working in coalition with each other, Alliance organizations sent material on various women’s issues to officials in 45 states and hundreds of cities.

Harrison noted that WAA feared the Ford administration would produce “a timid national plan,” to address women’s goals to establish greater equality.<sup>105</sup> Despite sharing parallel equity goals, Ford refused to meet with WAA representatives to discuss the proposed agenda. Officers of the organizations represented by WAA responded by issuing a statement of displeasure, stating, “While a government commission is useful, its activities and recommendations cannot be viewed as a substitute for those originating directly from women’s organizations in this country.”<sup>106</sup> To underscore the conflict, WAA hosted a “National Women’s Agenda Day,” on December 2, 1975. With the support of fifty national organization leaders, WAA presented the agenda to Congress. State and local legislators also received copies of the agenda from women’s organizations.<sup>107</sup>

Encouraged by positive press coverage, WAA began to adapt its National Women’s Agenda into a decade-long plan, corresponding with the recent United Nations proclamation of 1975-1985 as the “Decade of Women.” WAA developed taskforces, assigning specific issues to

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<sup>104</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 21, quoting a pamphlet produced for the national conference titled “Beyond Suffrage,” held October 1-2, 1976, US National Women’s Agenda Conference, National Women’s Agenda, box 192, file 15, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>105</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 20.

<sup>106</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 25.

<sup>107</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 26.

organizations within the Alliance. Taskforces gathered at a October, 1976 national convention, coalescing in a powerful coalition widely supported by hundreds of organizations, major corporations, and entertainment celebrities.<sup>108</sup> Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter spoke at the convention, declaring his intention to support the women's agenda. Encouraged by the show of support, WAA executive director Ruth Abram stated, "The challenge before us now is to take advantage of the consensus while maintaining the integrity, autonomy, character, and style of each of the organizations."<sup>109</sup> Abram's may have over-stated the significance of the conference's success. While print and television media covered Carter's conference address, as well as the support of celebrities for women's equality, the content of the National Women's Agenda received minimal attention.<sup>110</sup>

Harrison noted that as successful as WAA and its alliance organizations perceived the National Women's Agenda to be, the policies did not have the same political or social influence as that of the Ford administration's International Women's Year Commission. Chaired by Jill Ruckelshaus, with legislative proposals authored by Bella Abzug (also a WAA board member), the Commission recommended a national conference to determine and prioritize issues of concern to women.<sup>111</sup> In contrast, WAA leadership wanted the Commission to adopt the National Women's Agenda, arguing, "That Commission is by no means in touch with the broad

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<sup>108</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 29.

<sup>109</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 29.

<sup>110</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 30.

<sup>111</sup> The International Women's Year Commission proposal resulted in the 1977 Women's Conference, held in Houston, Texas.



spectrum of women represented by the organizations who helped create the Agenda.”<sup>112</sup>

Throughout 1976, WAA tried to influence the Commission, expressing a desire to be involved while also expressing frustration at the duplication of messaging from a competing interest. Harrison described Abram’s growing exasperation, citing the minutes of a national agenda meeting where Abram argued, “Who appointed this Committee? A man. If we allow all our hopes, unity, strength to be handed over, entrusted to a commission set up by a man, we’re surrendering all we have.”<sup>113</sup>

The International Women’s Year Commission retained the support of the federal government in both the Ford and the subsequent Carter administrations, and became the defining authority on women’s equity concerns for the public. Self-described feminist legislators and entertainment figures focused media attention on the Commission’s plans for the Houston Conference as the event that would determine policy. The prestigious backing of public figures overwhelmed the strength of WAA’s coalition of women’s organizations, many of whom chafed under WAA’s insistence that implementation of the National Women’s Agenda was the only means of accomplishing goals. By the time of the November, 1977 National Conference in Houston, Abram relented, acknowledging that the Agenda and the Commission

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<sup>112</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 32, citing Ruth Abram’s letter to Julia Graham Lear, Federation of Organizations for Professional Women, dated September 2, 1975, box 194, file 4, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>113</sup> Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 33, citing National Meeting minutes, National Women’s Agenda Conference, October 2, 1976, 2, box 193, file 1, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

goals overlapped enough to create satisfactory policy language to define women's demands, enabling stronger coalitions to form.<sup>114</sup>

#### The Smithsonian Institution Women's Council: Developing Public Programming

While WAA represented a very public coalition focused on defining federal policy, private groups also sought to increase women's representation in both government and society. Throughout the 1970s, members of the Smithsonian Institution Women's Council regularly developed programming to increase women's presence in Smithsonian activities and to expand awareness of women's history.<sup>115</sup> In 1979, the Smithsonian Women's Council allied with WAA and historian Gerda Lerner, as the host site for the closing ceremony of the 1979 Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History.

Formed as a reaction to the too-frequent exclusion of women's value from historical interpretations, Women's Council members hosted lunch hour seminars and workshop events for employees. Based on perceived information needs, topics varied from specific historical events to credit laws, childcare facilities, rape, cancer, and Smithsonian career opportunities.

As an advisory council to Smithsonian administration, Women's Council members also surveyed

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<sup>114</sup> Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 36. Note: After assuming the presidency, Carter established an additional government agency, the National Advisory Committee for Women (NACW), through Executive Order 2040, on April 4, 1978. Intended to implement International Women's Year Plan of Action policies decided at the Houston Conference, the NACW lacked federal funding, staffing, and would cease to exist when Carter left office.

<sup>115</sup> Formally established on April 19, 1972, the Women's Council continues to meet once a month. A 20-member board of directors is elected biannually from Smithsonian employees. Its focus remains on providing training opportunities, employee benefit programs, lectures, and the publication of its newsletter, *Four Star*. Chairpersons of the Smithsonian Institution Women's Council have included Edna Owens, 1972; Gretchen Gayle, 1973; Edith Mayo, 1974; Mary C. Quinn, 1975; Diane G. Walker, 1976; Penelope A. Packard, 1977; Rosemary M. DeRosa, 1978; Charlene James, 1979; Audrey B. Davis, 1980; Margaret Santiago, 1981; Elizabeth Beuck, 1982; and Susan Kalcik, 1983-. Smithsonian Institution Archives, [https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris\\_arc\\_216879](https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_216879).

Smithsonian exhibit policies, as well as hiring and promotion practices.<sup>116</sup> “Women’s Week” events encouraged Smithsonian curators to further develop women’s history exhibits, or at least, include more women in general exhibits.

A June 1974 memo from coordinator of the Women’s Program LaVerne M. Love to other Smithsonian directors proposed designating August as “Women’s History Month at the Smithsonian,” a proposed annual commemoration of the August 26 anniversary of Women’s Right to Vote.<sup>117</sup> Love noted that many national women’s organizations would welcome a commemoration of the significant date. The purpose of establishing a commemorative month at the internationally-respected Smithsonian was threefold: to develop a public exhibit of the evolution of women’s role in United States history; to promote the Smithsonian Institution Women’s Program to employees; and to serve as public evidence of women’s important role in history. Love wanted the exhibit placed in a “highly visible” area. Posters and photographs of female employees would explain women’s roles in the Smithsonian. A grand opening would welcome more than two hundred dignitaries. Despite Love’s thorough planning, the event did not occur.

Echoing other women’s organizations responses to the UN proclamation of “International Women’s Year,” the Smithsonian Women’s Council focused their activities throughout 1975-77 on promoting gender equality and recognizing the value of increasing

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<sup>116</sup> Dianne Walker, Women’s Council, # 03-076 Box 1 folder Women’s History Month, File Women’s Week at the Smithsonian Institute, October 3-7, 1977, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 507, Smithsonian Institution Women’s Council, Records.

<sup>117</sup> LaVerne M. Love, Women’s Council Coordinator, memo to Mr. Robert Brooks, Under Secretary; Mr. Richard Ault, Director of Support Activities; Archie D. Grimmett, Director, Equal Opportunities, Co# 03-076 Box 1 folder Women’s History Month, June 14, 1974, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 507, Smithsonian Institution Women’s Council, Records.

awareness of women's contributions to world peace. Public programming targeted women's involvement in economic, social, and cultural development. Internal programming concentrated on resolving the "underutilization and distribution of women in Smithsonian Institution workforce."<sup>118</sup> Workshops addressed raising awareness of women's job skills, furthering education and training for non-clerical jobs, and placing women on exhibition decision-making panels. Council members conducted field visits to satellite museum installations to evaluate the inclusion of women in exhibits.

Members of the Smithsonian's Women Program and Council were well aware that they were conducting research and creating exhibits that established a legacy of women's history, one that reflected, according to Love, "a true partnership between men and women and between management and employees." The Women's Council commitment to the inclusion of women's history in Smithsonian programming found limited support and a marked lack of understanding from male directors in administrative control of Institute. The fourth annual "Women's Week at Smithsonian Institute" in 1976 moved beyond workshops on future exhibits and career development to include panel discussions of race. The film, "Portrait of a People," detailed the experiences of Spanish-speaking people. Another panel, led by black women, addressed "Diverse Perspectives on Minority Women." In contrast to these two progressive topics, presentations by men focused on "The Best Man for the Job May Be a Woman" and

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<sup>118</sup> Untitled memo, June 29, 1977, Box 1, folder Women's History Month, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 507, Smithsonian Institution Women's Council, Records.

“The FWP: Woman from a Man’s Point of View” - given by Mr. David Copus, deputy chief of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.<sup>119</sup>

As a coalition of independent museums, the Smithsonian Institute wielded tremendous influence over national and international interpretations of United States history. Influenced by the era of women’s activism coalitions they lived and worked in, members of the Smithsonian Women’s Council carefully navigated the male-dominated hierarchy of the Institution’s administration. Continuing year after year to create programming and exhibits that challenged this exclusionary authority certainly took courage and determination. While Institution administration could point to the popular “First Ladies” exhibit prominently housed in the National Museum of American History as evidence of a commitment to include women in history, the Women’s Council recognized that smaller measures influenced change too.

Opening day programming on the 1977 Women’s Week commemoration focused on women’s roles in United States history featured in the museum’s “We, the People” bicentennial exhibit and a public reading of “The Declaration of Interdependence.” A document stating the aspirations of a wide spectrum of women’s rights groups, the declaration simulated the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of Sentiments, but focused on global inequalities and injustice.<sup>120</sup> Viewed as a defining political statement, “The Declaration of Interdependence” prompted notable public figures like author Wilma Scott Heide, EEOC

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<sup>119</sup> Memo, September 28, 1976, Box 1, folder Women’s History Month, Record Unit 507, Smithsonian Institution Women’s Council, Records. I am assuming that FWP references the Federal Women’s Program, established in 1967 by President Lyndon Johnson to prohibit sex discrimination in the workplace. FWP becomes administered by the EEOC in 1972. There is a certain irony that in today’s acronym-driven world, FWP alternatively reflects “first world problems” or “friends with privileges.”

<sup>120</sup> Declaration of Interdependence, drafted July 4, 1976. Copy of this Declaration can be found: [http://reignoftheheavens.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/US\\_Declaration\\_of\\_Interdependence\\_1976.pdf](http://reignoftheheavens.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/US_Declaration_of_Interdependence_1976.pdf)

Commissioner Eleanor Holmes Norton, sports icon Billie Jean King, and Environmental Protection Agency director Edith Tebo to attend opening functions of 1977 Women's Week. Subsequent days focused on meeting political candidates, attending career development workshops, and development of future programming goals.

Despite significant public attendance at the 1977 Women's Week commemorations, a September memo from Women's Council chair Dianne Walker reminded Smithsonian Women's Council members and candidates to take advantage of workshops given during Women's Week, in order to encourage "the Administration to hold such classes in the future."<sup>121</sup>

#### Sarah Lawrence College Seminar on Women's History, 1976: Developing Teaching Strategies

While WAA executive director Abram did not want "a man" to define which issues and policies concerned women, historian Gerda Lerner did not want men to limit the practice and scholarship of women's history. In *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, Lerner outlined her position, stating, "Women's history is both a world view and a compensatory strategy for offsetting the male bias of traditional history. It is an intellectual movement of serious and considerable range, which aims for a new synthesis which will eventually make its continuation unnecessary."<sup>122</sup> This position guided Lerner's role as the

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<sup>121</sup> Dianne Walker, memo, September 27, 1977, Box 1, folder Women's History Month, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 507, Smithsonian Institution Women's Council, Records.

<sup>122</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), xv. Born in 1920, Lerner's childhood exposure to female independence, paired with Marxist ideology informed her dedication to developing women's history programs. Surviving for six weeks in an Austrian prison camp as a Nazi resister in 1938 honed her commitment to activism. Lerner arrived in the United States in 1939. After marrying Carl Lerner, a Communist theater director in Hollywood in 1941, Lerner became a respected writer in multiple genres. She also became a national leader in the Congress of American Women, part of the Communist Party's Women's International Democratic Federation. Lerner's involvement with these groups expanded her understanding of economic class limitations and its connection to race. At 38, Lerner enrolled in college, earning a BA and a PhD in six years. Her dissertation (published the following year by Houghton-Mifflin) focused on the Grimke sisters, contextualizing the intersections of race and social class in the abolitionist movement. Lerner

architect of the first MA program on women's history in the United States. Established in 1972, Sarah Lawrence College (Bronxville, NY) invested heavily in furthering Lerner's recognition of the value of women's history. This commitment led to a series of women's history teaching conferences: a seminar held in the summer of 1976 and an Institute held in the summer of 1979.

For its 1976 inaugural public seminar, the Sarah Lawrence College Women's History program hosted a three-week intensive for high school teachers, focused on integrating women's history into curricula. Forty-three educators from sixteen different states attended the seminar. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and sponsored by the American Historical Association (AHA), the seminar reflected the increasing need for training and materials on women's history. The primary goal of the seminar aimed to assist incorporation of current research, methodology, and practical teaching skills through course work, learning experiences, workshops, and tutorials. Teachers learned how to examine textbooks for bias and gaps in information, as well as develop lesson plans that detailed experiences of women.

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began teaching women's history classes at Sarah Lawrence College in 1968. Recognizing that class on women's history would not be sufficient to "build respect for the field," she fought with administrators and faculty to develop programs to expand awareness of women's history. After establishing the first MA program on women's history (along with historian Joan Kelly) at Sarah Lawrence College, Lerner accepted a professorship at the University of Wisconsin (Madison), where she built the first PhD program on women's history in the United States. Throughout her career, Lerner focused her research and teaching practices on exploring how inequality reproduced through gender, race, and social class. She also continually advocated for the expansion of women's history. For example, a condition of her employment at the University of Wisconsin was the hiring of a second faculty member in women's history, Linda Gordon. In biographical notes on her life, Gordon reflected on Lerner's legacy to women's history as "the necessity of her life's greatest work," and Lerner's desire "for it not to be pigeon-holed as a separate 'field' left to specialists. She wanted a holistic history and she wanted a history that served to advance understanding of all forms of injustice." (Linda Gordon, Gerda Lerner biography, <http://www.gerdalerner.com/biography/>).

The framework of the seminar used a conference model of workshops and lectures to promote interaction between attendees and instructors, enabling a dialogue to develop between participants. This format encouraged group and individual learning, and acted as a template for future conferences. Pedagogy concentrated on United States history, as most high school curricula emphasized this study. Lerner, in her role as director of the Women's History Program, oversaw an extensive list of "guiding questions" related to teaching material. These questions reflected existing scholarship as well as potential gaps in knowledge. The simplicity of the questions belied their complexity: how did women live and what did they do; how did women relate to other women; what were women told to do; what did women really do; what did women do that men were also doing; how did women see their world; how did women's sexuality affect their lives; how did motherhood affect the lives of women; how did women respond to their subordinate status in society; what were the consequences of their responses; how did individual feminist consciousness develop into a collective consciousness; what events and institutions have been particularly significant for women; why have women participated in their own oppression; what has been the experience of women of different classes, races, or religious and ethnic groups in terms of the above questions; can the similarities and differences be explained? For each of these questions, the group developed a topic from which to approach teaching, aided by appropriate reading material, media, games, and/or questionnaires. In response to collective discussion at the seminar, nine curriculum packets developed the following topics:

- Family history as a method to study social history
- Women and work
- Housework
- Space (Public/Private)



The Future of Women

Feminism from suffrage to women's liberation

The diary of ---, a fictional representation of a 19th century woman

Deviance in the 19th century and the American woman

Feminine Consciousness and Activity<sup>123</sup>

Thematically, these subjects reflected many of the contemporary tensions, ironies, and contradictions present both in the women's movement and in History as an academic discipline. As the women's movement systematized fights for greater recognition of the benefits of equality through the federal government, women historians increasingly utilized organizations to validate and expand their contributions to History.<sup>124</sup>

In a follow-up evaluation of the teaching seminar that assessed how women's history scholarship translated to secondary education, faculty member Amy Swerdlow reported positive student responses to the teaching approaches and theme development. Lessons proved to be equally interesting to both girls and boys when material applied critically to their

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<sup>123</sup> Amy Swerdlow, "The Sarah Lawrence Summer Institute in Women's History." *Women's Studies Newsletter* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 6.

<sup>124</sup> Barred from the professionally advantageous social events held in conjunction with male-dominated historical conferences, American Historical Association (AHA) members Louise Fargo Brown (Vassar College) and Louise Ropes Loomis (Wells College) founded the Berkshire Conference in 1930, as a social opportunity for women historians to gather. Named after the location, attendance of the conference steadily grew as more women earned doctorates after World War II. Smaller, regional conferences regularly occurred throughout the United States. Encouraged by feminist goals of parity in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship on women's history expanded rapidly and gained popularity. The establishment of a prestigious book prize in 1968 and an article prize in 1971 furthered the establishment of women's history as a significant contribution to History, one with its own themes and methodology. By the time the first "Big Berks" happened in 1973, women's history classes and programs began to develop on college campuses. The popularity of the first edited collection of presented papers, *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (Lois Banner and Mary S. Hartman, eds., Harper & Row, 1974), inspired another conference to be held in 1974. Now held biannually, the Berkshire Conference continues to advance women's history through the scholarship presented at its conferences, associated prestigious awards and fellowships, and sustained coalitions with other historical associations and contemporary women's organizations. (Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, <https://berksconference.org/about/history/>).

lives. Teachers' enthusiastically added information learned at the seminar to their classes.<sup>125</sup>

Many attending instructors began or expanded Women's History courses in their high schools.

Lectures, in-service workshops, or discussion sessions offered opportunities to share information with colleagues and administrators. Teachers also distributed information to community organizations and media outlets. Teachers asked for additional programming to expand their education programs and to reach a wider range of teachers.<sup>126</sup>

#### The Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History, 1979: Combining Coalitions with Women's History

Encouraged by the success of the 1976 seminar, Sarah Lawrence College women's history faculty began preparation for a second summer teaching conference. These goals shifted in December 1977, when WAA executive director Ruth Abram wrote Lerner, proposing that Sarah Lawrence College act as host to a two-week intensive on women's history and organizational history for the leaders of national women's organizations. Motivated by the success of the recent National Women's Conference in Houston that reflected many of the goals of WAA's National Women's Agenda, Abram sought an opportunity to bring her coalition members together to learn about women's history, with the intent to "put history to work for the benefit of full equality."<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Reportedly, all but two teachers changed their curriculum as a result of seminar attendance. Swerdlow's notes do not address whether the lack of change by these two instructors was due to a lack of interest on their part or a result of local or state enforced requirements.

<sup>126</sup> Swerdlow, "Sarah Lawrence Summer Institute," 7.

<sup>127</sup> Ruth Abram, letter to Gerda Lerner, December 5, 1977, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration and Bibliography, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

To this end, the WAA suggested five goals for the Institute. Of utmost interest: elevating the importance of women's history to women's organizations. In correspondence with Lerner, Abram noted that organizations had to begin to take their role in changing history seriously. Secondly, WAA sought to radicalize organization leaders by building awareness of women's accomplishments within their respective organizations. By tracing the long history of organizational involvement in topics such as abortion, suffrage, and equal rights, Abram believed that leaders would become even more politically active to ensure and reflect their legacies. The third goal was to make women's history an important part of programming within women's organizations through the development of archives and libraries. Organizations would be encouraged to develop internal courses and exhibits on women's history, to share with members and local communities. Fourth: explore a deeper understanding of organizational memory by learning about how former organization leaders addressed past political concerns. Lastly, Abram sought to develop greater understanding of the racial and socioeconomic barriers that too frequently limited the full participation of women in some organizations.<sup>128</sup>

Both Abram and Lerner created a list of desired attendees from the extensive list of WAA coalition members. With over two hundred organizations allied with WAA, the initial selection process took several months. Before extending an offer to apply to attend, WAA carefully considered the activism focus of each organization, as well as the constituency of its members. The geographic location of each organization, as well as its individual effectiveness in

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<sup>128</sup> Administration memo, 1978, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

representing and accomplishing regional and national goals also influenced potential invitation decisions. Inclusion required strong reputations of successful activism.

After evaluating all of the candidates, eighty-seven organizations received invitations. While invited organizations spanned a wide range of political interests, each fulfilled a specific goal or interest set by the WAA's National Women's Agenda. WAA asked organizations to nominate potential attendees. Then, WAA and Institute faculty evaluated the level of influence representatives offered in respect to their organizational position (trustee, president, board member, executive director, high-level staff member, or founder). Socioeconomic status, race, sexual preference, age, professional experience, and life experience also informed the decision-making.

Institute organizers did not realize until late in the planning stages the financial barriers some attendees would face, however. This handicap was particularly true for organizations that represented minority and/or economically disadvantaged women. Economic disparity affected the ability to attend. If an invited participant could not arrange for funding, there were no resources available through WAA or Sarah Lawrence College.

Conference space and resources at Sarah Lawrence College limited attendance, further complicating the decision-making process and creating a competitive climate for inclusion. After much negotiation, strategizing, and compromise, WAA and Institute faculty selected forty-five attendees. Several applicants moved to an "alternate" list, with the possibility of inclusion if others could not arrange attendance. A reflection of the political motivations present in every move made by WAA, representatives from urban-headquartered organizations that addressed

nationally scaled issues like poverty, education, labor, and health made up the largest percentage of participants.<sup>129</sup>

Abram's investment in addressing national agenda issues created a conflict with the Smithsonian Institution, who initially arranged to be co-sponsors of the Institute. Members of the Smithsonian Women's Council wished to be involved in organizing programming for the Institute, but ultimately had to decline. Smithsonian administrators sought to minimize public support in order to avoid any association with "contemporary issues."<sup>130</sup> In giving "qualified approval" to early discussions of Smithsonian involvement in the SLC Institute, Richard Conroy (Office of International Programs) stated, "If this seminar would be something other than a tedious (for a man) recital of the exceptional accomplishments of a few women, then the seminar would raise some consciousness but few intellectual horizons." Conroy further noted, "White men and women in most societies are not natural enemies, and that even though laws and social institutions often lag infuriatingly behind changed circumstances, such fundamental social matters as the status of women are largely controlled by the realities of life."<sup>131</sup> In spite of Conroy's unwillingness, members of the Women's Council did contribute important resources to the Institute: artifacts and personnel from the Smithsonian Women's Division,

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<sup>129</sup> Institute participant list and schedule, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Institute Description, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>130</sup> Julian Euell, memo to Wilton Dillon, November 10, 1977, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration and Bibliography, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>131</sup> Edith Mayo, memo to Laverne Love, Box 1, Folder: Women's History Month, 1972-1997, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 507, Smithsonian Institution Women's Council, Records.

publications aimed at women's history, and the expertise of traveling exhibit personnel.<sup>132</sup>

Blocked from sponsorship, the Smithsonian offered to host a breakfast for participants, sponsors, and dignitaries on the final day of the Institute.

Correspondence and negotiations on the structure and content of the Institute continued for the next year between Abram and Lerner, as sponsorship associations, funding, and publicity decisions finalized. Lerner's insistence on "a learning retreat" free of "competition, status-consciousness, private ambition, and status prejudice." had to balance with Abram's goal of developing a "sisterhood."<sup>133</sup> To facilitate the development of a "feminist community," the Institute would operate as a closed campus for the duration of the conference. "Students" would be restricted from access to television coverage and photography except on the last day of the Institute, at the Smithsonian breakfast gala. Sarah Lawrence College audiovisual students would tape lectures and workshops, and photograph participants for archival purposes only. Focused on their own aspirations for the Institute, Abram and Lerner did not expect tensions to arise. "Students" of the Institute came from positions of authority within their respective organizations. Some resisted being pupils, expected to learn within a rigorous schedule that they had no control over. Some attendees

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<sup>132</sup> At the time of the Institute, members of the Smithsonian Women's Council were in active negotiations to develop a women's exhibit, with a proposed opening in 1982-3. The proposed exhibit would focus on the history of women as a distinct class of history. Thematically, the exhibit would focus on women's work in both private and public space. Particular emphasis noted the shift from the home as the center of production to expanded roles in politics and organizations. LaVerne Love, director of the Women's Program, and Edith Mayo, curator of political history, hoped to announce the exhibit at the Institute closing breakfast, hosted by the Smithsonian. Margaret Brown Klapthor, curator of the popular "First Ladies" exhibit, agreed to hold the space for a women's exhibit, thereby freeing up valuable museum space.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Gerda Lerner, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Amy Swerdlow, memo to Barbara Omolade and Ruth Abram, February 16, 1979, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration Meetings with Gerda Lerner, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA. The association with "sisterhood" likely reflects WAA's origins, historicizing Steinem's original insistence on "sisterhood" as a foundation of the Alliance.

had minimal advanced education, so found the sheer volume of required study overwhelming within the daily schedule. Other attendees had completed education levels comparable to Institute faculty, creating tension based on the assumption of mutual respect. Ironically, in trying to facilitate an environment based on the feminist principle of equality, Lerner's use of "faculty" and "students" set up a dichotomy: highest on the hierarchy, faculty alone determined Institute content and learning procedures, presuming that students would submit willingly to faculty expertise.

A practical consideration of attendee demographics could have alleviated much of the conflict that occurred between faculty and students. First, the Institute received far more unsolicited applications than expected. Women eager to learn more about women's history applied, despite not having organization affiliations. In addition, organizations frequently recommended multiple women for participation, creating competition between applicants for a coveted invitation. Applicants ranged from ages 27 to 58. The majority of applicants had college degrees. Most were white and married with children. Most of the attending organization representatives came from the northeast United States. As a result, many of the attendees shared similarity and familiarity of language, culture, and access to political and economic resources that excluded those from outside the region. This exacerbated differences in age, education background, race, marital status, number of children/familial responsibilities, and sexual expression: questions included in every application. Participants with cultural differences or viewpoints found themselves living in close quarters with women they did not know. Most attendees did set aside any resulting tensions in the excitement of attending the Institute. On their applications, attendees described both the goals and programs of their

respective organizations and their individual interests. Each potential student detailed how their attendance at the Institute would benefit their organization's mission. Additional questions asked attendees to envision ideas on how the use of women's history could enhance an organization's programs and activities, while also identifying ways to improve usage of women's history in the organization.<sup>134</sup>

Attendees' interest in studying history varied, but largely focused on three areas: history of minority women, labor history, and expanding women's history education. Gracia Molina Pick, Vice-President of the Comision Femencil Mexicana Nacional organization, which provided educational and leadership training for national Chicana and Hispanic organizations, acknowledged that Chicana history and southwest US history remained "sorely lacking." Pick noted the absence of educational resources, archival material, and professional training as factors in the lagging development of these histories. Pick also commented on the long history of racism that added additional tension: "It was difficult to reconcile the much heralded democratic principles of equality and fairness, of the Bill of Rights, and be denied entrance to the US during the McCarthy era, or be refused a marriage license because it was illegal for people of the 'white race' to marry people of the 'brown race,' or admission to a hospital, a school, or a burial ground, because of color and ancestry."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> List of potential students, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Selected Students, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>135</sup> Gracia Molina Pick, Comision Femencil Mexicana Nacional, application, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Participants: 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.



Adding information on women's history to the educational material distributed by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), inspired Mary Ann Ball Tyler's attendance. Chair of AAUW's Committee on Women, Tyler recognized that "If women are to confront the challenges of humanizing life in the 21st century, we need to know our heritage."<sup>136</sup> Dorothy K. Howard, Chair of the Girl Scouts of America's Membership and Councils Committee, argued that children also needed to learn this heritage, in order to become informed citizens. Howard planned to utilize Institute material to diversify Girl Scout material, in order to increase minority participation in scouting.<sup>137</sup> Betsy Brinson, director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Southern Women's Rights Project, hoped to bring more awareness to the oral histories of early 20th century ACLU members, housed in Princeton's archives. Brinson noted that the contributions of these suffrage-era feminists rarely received notice in the primarily homogenous explanations of this period.<sup>138</sup>

Marjorie Albert, member of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) connected knowledge of women's labor history to unionization efforts in her application, stating, "Women can add to their own and their union's strength through collective action and education." Albert cited the pronounced need for historical material (films, slide shows, etc.) to illustrate the history of unions and to encourage women to "hang in" during the periods of struggle

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<sup>136</sup> Mary Ann Ball Tyler, American Association of University Women, application, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Participants, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>137</sup> Dorothy K. Howard, Girl Scouts of the USA, application, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Participants, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>138</sup> Betsy Brinson, American Civil Liberties Union, application, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Participants, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

common to organizing.<sup>139</sup> Another member of CLUW, Connie Kopelov, stated the need to apply past unionization struggles and strategies to present dilemmas, arguing, “If women’s history is presented as relevant to today’s concerns, CLUW and individual unions might expand use of it.”<sup>140</sup> Marsha Zakowski, Civil Rights staff member in the United Steelworkers of America, recognized women’s history as integral to eliminating discrimination. Zakowski noted that “women are not new to the labor movement,” and the roles women played in developing the political, social, and economic processes of the United States offered great subject matter for historians. Greater knowledge of such would also benefit both union organizers and civil rights workers struggling with a growing conservative right-wing movement, “trying to move civil rights and women’s rights backwards.”<sup>141</sup>

Current representative of the Continuing Committee of the Houston National Women’s Conference for the New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands region, Judy Lerner (no relation to Gerda), reflected that the Houston Conference of 1977 had been the first national women’s conference in over one hundred years: since the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Inspired by her recent experience as a delegate to the Houston Conference, Lerner sought to continue development of a “historical consciousness,” in which women’s history was

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<sup>139</sup> Marjorie Albert, Coalition of Labor Union Women, application, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Participants, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>140</sup> Connie Kopelov, Coalition of Labor Union Women, application, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Participants, 1979, 6, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>141</sup> Marsha Zakowski, United Steelworkers of America, application, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Participants, 1979, 11, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

“not ignored, but studied and used.” Lerner wanted women to “apply history to a political framework, and practice how to make it work for change.”<sup>142</sup>

On this, attendees and faculty agreed. The means of learning women’s history proved more challenging. While attendees came to the Institute with clearly defined goals, faculty objectives echoed those of the 1976 seminar on high school history curricula: expand basic knowledge of women’s history. Lerner explicitly stated her goal for the Institute was “an attempt to bring scholarship and methodology that have emerged at advanced levels of research and education in Women’s History to a group of participants not selected for their educational interest or preparation, but for their leadership and activism.”<sup>143</sup> Lerner recognized the experience as “intensive,” but did not acknowledge any other potential issues that attendees may face. Beyond the financial issues that developed in the final stages of organizing the Institute, most attendees could not leave family and work obligations unattended for over two weeks. Rarely can women carve out significant blocks of time to devote exclusively to learning. The physical, emotional, and psychological pressure placed on “activists” expected suddenly to become “academics” was unrealistic. Add in the tension of learning barriers, financial worries, personality conflicts with Institute roommates, and general homesickness: the Institute learning experience was anything but a “retreat.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Judy Lerner, Continuing Committee of the Houston National Women’s Conference, application, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Participants, 1979, 3, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>143</sup> Gerda Lerner and Ruth Abram, correspondence notes, January 5, 1979, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Gerda Lerner, 1979, 20, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>144</sup> Organizations hosting attendees were expected to cover travel expenses and supply funding for textbooks. Food and lodging were communal, covered by Sarah Lawrence College as the host.

Faculty members Gerda Lerner, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Amy Swerdlow utilized their individual research expertise in the Institute learning schedule, using the two-week framework as an intensive classroom. Lerner's 1972 text *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, Kessler-Harris' research on women's labor history, and Swerdlow's involvement in antiwar activism and interracial housing issues defined the scholarly template.<sup>145</sup> Tapped by Abram to represent WAA's interests in the Institute, Barbara Omolade also agreed to lead a panel on black women's history, when the absence of this history from the schedule became evident.<sup>146</sup>

#### The Proposal of Women's History Week(Month): Sisterhood Takes Charge

In a post-Institute interview with *Ms. Magazine*, Omolade stated:

We came from small towns like Clarinda, Iowa, and Blue Hill, Maine, and from large cities including Richmond, Virginia, and San Antonio, Texas. We came from the traditional organizations like the Girl Scouts, the YWCA, and the National Council of Negro Women, from new organizations like the National Coalition against Domestic Violence and National Women's Employment and Education, Inc. Our diversity showed in the range of ages, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual preference. For 17 days, we lived in a feminist community devoted to study, thinking, and exchange.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Press Release, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Publicity, Smithsonian ceremony: correspondence and press statements, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA. At the time of the Institute, Lerner co-chaired the Women's Studies program at Sarah Lawrence, Kessler-Harris was an associate professor of History at Hofstra University, and Swerdlow edited women's history books and directed the AHA Institute of Women's History in Secondary Schools.

<sup>146</sup> Omolade served as chairperson of the Civil Rights Coordinating Council in 1964 and was instrumental in organizing campus Freedom Week events to teach about and recruit volunteers for the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project.

<sup>147</sup> Barbara Omolade, "Finding Ourselves...and Each Other," *Ms. Magazine*, December 1979, 110. Many attendees arrived during the day on July 13, in order to settle into their campus lodgings before the start of the Institute on July 14.

The Women's History Summer Institute ran from July 14-29, 1979. Hosted by Sarah Lawrence College, sponsored by the Women's Action Alliance, in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institute, the Institute invited participants from all over the United States, representing forty-five different women's organizations. The Lilly Endowment funded the event, with a grant of \$55,408.<sup>148</sup> The Institute opened formally on July 15 with a panel seminar led by faculty members discussing "What Women's History Means to Me" and "What Women's History Means to the Movement." Subsequent days of the conference featured lectures and workshops, each arranged around a specific theme. Attendance at lectures and workshops was mandatory, limited only to faculty, attendees, and a handful of Sarah Lawrence College graduate students chosen to be Institute assistants.

Faculty members chose a formal lecture format for the Institute as a means to build a foundation of basic knowledge useful to students and the organizations they represented, reflecting the high expectations for attendees. Lecture topics varied from day to day, covering women's work in the home and workplace, suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment, control of women's sexuality, and social change. Kessler-Harris used anonymous 19th century poetry to illustrate labor history. Swerdlow, focusing on her experience organizing for Women Strike For Peace, offered practical organizational advice. Using examples like "red-baiting" and "lesbian-baiting," Lerner challenged students to examine how labels of deviance created resistance to activist work, negatively affecting any women's movement to overcome oppression and/or

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<sup>148</sup> Laura Bornholdt, Vice President for Education, Lilly Foundation, letter to Ruth Abram (undated), Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Institute Description, 1979, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA. The majority of expenses went to faculty salaries, publicity, and administrative needs. As a condition of funding the Institute, the Lilly Endowment requested prior approval of any publicity announcement concerning the Institute (which WAA did not uphold).

achievement of independence.<sup>149</sup> In post-conference evaluations, many students commented on the lack of representation of minority women, both as participants and in educational content. Only one lecture specifically addressed race: titled “Black Women,” given by Lerner. In recalling the content of lectures, Omolade noted, “These offered more than many of us had come to expect from our school-room recollection of a ‘names-dates-major themes’ history recitation.”<sup>150</sup>

Participants quickly needed to engage in the material, in order to keep up with the workload. Many later reported giving up sleep in an effort to complete daily reading requirements. Afternoon breaks offered time for library research or reading assigned texts. The more diverse evening schedule contained films (popular and documentary, focused on common women’s issues and interests), performances, or lectures. Edith Mayo, then-curator of the Smithsonian Institute’s Museum of History and Technology, presented on preserving the artifacts of women’s organizations. Leaders that intended to set up organization archives found this information valuable. Barbara Omolade led a popular panel: Ethnic Women’s History, a last minute addition to include more speakers from Black and other women of color organizations. Many students added a request for more information on minority women to their exit interviews. Blanche Cook lectured on “Lesbianism in the Cultural Tradition,” addressing some of the concerns feminist lesbians continued to voice after the Houston Conference. Attendees reported great enjoyment of the evening discussion panels and entertainment, finding these

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<sup>149</sup> Barbara Omolade, “Finding Ourselves...and Each Other,” 111.

<sup>150</sup> Barbara Omolade, “Finding Ourselves...and Each Other,” 112.

learning opportunities to be more relaxed and conducive of conversation amongst their fellow participants.

Based on individual interests and sponsoring organization interests, students took part in one of three seminars: Women: Life, Life Cycles, and Family Roles; Women in the Economy; or Women in Community and Political Life. Within the seminar workshops, students divided into groups of 3-6, to develop a project to meet specific organizational needs or goals connected to women's history.<sup>151</sup> On Saturday, July 28, the final full day of the Institute, workshops would present their projects. From these projects, participants would choose a major initiative to focus on in the weeks and months after the Institute, as a means of continuing progress towards establishing women's history as valuable. A public announcement would be made at the Institute closing ceremony, hosted the next morning by the Smithsonian Women's Council. Faculty encouraged projects that focused on the development of organizational archives or ways to increase donation of material to established university archives: practical measures, from the perspective of academically trained historians.

Participants had other ideas.

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<sup>151</sup> These small workshops draw on the "consciousness raising" groups popularized in the late 1960s. Consciousness-raising groups served a purpose as the primary avenue to education, especially of the public. Gathering in informal small groups offered easy accessibility, a sense of community and familiarity, and a commitment to shared ideas and governance. On a practical level, consciousness-raising taught women the language and norms of negotiation: first, the definition of a problem, followed by the preparation, discussion, proposition, bargaining, and agreement necessary to solve the problem. Consciousness-raising groups typically offered no defined authority or hierarchy, favoring opportunities to share comparable experiences. Groups had the potential to attract a diversity of participants. Historic connections to consciousness-raising groups used during the early civil rights movement and labor union negotiations inspired a level of trust for both white and Black women. However, many groups remained homogenous, divided by racial and/or socioeconomic identities. Consciousness-raising in itself had little political efficacy. Value stemmed from their usefulness as a strong grassroots networking source for activists and larger organizations in developing a "sisterhood" of multiple perspectives. Within the small group structure, women learned to express their experiences and their opinions. The conversation that developed within small, close-knit groups of likeminded individuals supported involvement in larger coalitions.

First, to recognize many of the historical figures that inspired so much of the work continued by organizations and activists, the graduate students assisting with the Institute bestowed “sisterhood” distinctions to each participant.<sup>152</sup> The “sisterhoods” paired each attendee with a woman from history that complemented their work or interests. Post-Institute reflections noted the meaningfulness of this ceremony and the kinship felt with their historical “sister.” Then, each workshop group presented its chosen project, developed with the ultimate goal of “transformation of consciousness over time” in mind.<sup>153</sup> Noting potential implications of race, class, sexism, and language barriers to successful implementation, participant evaluated how well the considered project would further coalitions between different groups.

The plan to establish a National Women’s History Week (later Month) emerged from these small workshops. In her Institute application, Molly MacGregor noted that she worked for multiple women’s organizations: Feminist History Project; Education Task Force of the Sonoma County (CA) Commission on the Status of Women, and the Women’s Support Network, which coordinated and facilitated local community services for women. Through her work as Projects Director for California’s Commission, MacGregor developed educational materials and programs supporting a local Women’s History Week commemoration in 1978. The California Commission also focused on putting women’s history into school curriculums. These efforts concentrated on a countywide education effort involving schools, libraries, and government.

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<sup>152</sup> While “sisterhood” was a key element of WAA’s foundation, this term was popular throughout the 1970s. “Sisterhood is powerful” was perhaps the best known, referenced in Robin Morgan’s 1970 anthology of feminist writing. (*Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan, New York: Random House, 1970.)

<sup>153</sup> Closing ceremony, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Institute Schedule/SLC Summer, 1979, 6, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.



MacGregor's personal goals mirrored those of the WAA and Institute faculty: build national networking connections and gain inspiration from other participants and the educational programming of the Institute. MacGregor also had one additional desire stated in her Institute application, "My 'pet dream' is to see Women's History Week celebrated during the week that includes International Women's Day, March 8th, in every town, city, and county throughout this country, and eventually all other countries."<sup>154</sup>

Institute participants overwhelmingly supported MacGregor's suggestion to establish a national women's history celebration. The proposal combined all of the goals of the Institute: a focus on education, building public awareness of women's history, raising support for the national agenda of progressing women's issues, and consolidating coalitions between women's organizations. The workshop proposal became the call to action.

## Conclusion

Successful coalition structures follow a pattern, "formed in concrete, historical, and political practice and analysis."<sup>155</sup> The identities that make up the coalitions are the first consideration. Who are the members? What strengths and weaknesses does each bring to the alliance? Next, developing guidelines for positive outcomes requires rules. Rules monitor size, location, and accessibility. If a coalition is too large or too disconnected (either by location or access to resources), valuable energy is spent on overcoming barriers. Third, the purpose of the

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<sup>154</sup> Molly MacGregor, Commission on the Status of Women, application, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Participants: Commission on the Status of Women (Santa Rosa), 1979-80, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA. Note: The Women's Support Network grew into what became the National Women's History Project.

<sup>155</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions*, (quoting Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88), 2.

coalition must be clear. The responsible party for making the decision on purpose also needs to be determined, hopefully with respect to equal representation in decision-making, participation, and implementation of any goals. Finally, the formal or informal legal status of the coalition will reflect its credibility and visibility.

The coalitions that came together at the 1979 Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History reflected the temporary cooperation of individual yet parallel interests in support of a joint action, founded in a long history of women's coalitions as necessary alliances. WAA and the Sarah Lawrence faculty shaped the opportunity to learn about women's history. Coalition-member organizations shaped interest and energy in the topic, supplying eager participants. Sponsorship from the Smithsonian Institution and the Lilly Foundation facilitated the event, supporting a practical space to learn and celebrate. Through the proposal to establish a national commemoration of women's history, Institute participants merged opportunity into action, becoming an enthusiastic community invested in the common goal of expanding the knowledge and practice of women's history.

### CHAPTER III

#### **“EACH BRANCH A PLACE IN THE SUN:” COALITIONS COMPLICATED**

*“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.”<sup>156</sup>*

A graduate student in the Sarah Lawrence College Women’s History Program and an experienced feminist organizer, Pam Elam worked as a teaching assistant at the Sarah Lawrence College Women’s History Summer Institute. Like other participants, Elam recognized the potential of Molly MacGregor’s proposal for a national celebration of women’s history; chiefly, the proposal had significant potential as an organizing tool for the larger feminist and women’s organization coalitions. On a personal level, spearheading the efforts to establish this commemoration on a national scale would be a life-changing personal learning experience. For Elam, the absence of women’s history as an educational tool resembled a continual “reinventing of the wheel.” As Elam noted, “if women had access to their history, to the work of feminist historians, scholars, and activists, they can learn from it, and would know what others had done and perhaps take a more informed action.”<sup>157</sup> The establishment of a national

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<sup>156</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

<sup>157</sup> Pam Elam, “The Making of Women’s History Month,” National Women’s History Project - Writing Women Back Into History, <http://www.nwhp.org/womens-history-month/past-womens-history-months/2010-gazette/>, 2.

celebration of women's history would make both a political statement and a cultural statement. Commemorations would shift public education, bringing greater awareness to the history taught in schools and covered by media. Commemorations would also strengthen coalitions between women's organizations, academics, and legislators. Elam's personal reaction reflected the excitement of many of the Institute participants, happy to have a concrete goal to advance. As the tangible outcome of a successful coalition, Women's History Month signified valuable recognition of women's contributions to society.

Initially, participants focused on establishing federal legislation in support of a weeklong commemoration. The model for this annual celebration was Black History Week. First observed in 1926 as "Negro History Week," the commemoration acknowledged the importance and value of black history. Historian Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), proposed celebrations take place in February, in honor of President Lincoln and Frederick Douglass' birthdays. Popularity quickly grew amongst educators. Kent State University first celebrated Black History Month in 1970. Within six years, this became a common practice. President Gerald Ford officially marked Black History Month in 1976, in correspondence with US bicentennial celebrations.<sup>158</sup>

Participants of the Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History intended for Women's History Month commemorations to mirror the perceived success of Black History Month. On a personal level, participants recognized that knowledge of women's history illustrated the legitimacy of possibility. The sharing of challenges, victories, and defeats that

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<sup>158</sup> Gerald R. Ford, "Message on the Observance of Black History Month," February 10, 1976, Ford Library and Museum website, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-the-observance-black-history-month-february-1976> (accessed December 18, 2020).

complicated women's experiences in society had the potential to expand understanding of women's roles in history and in society. Without knowledge of women's history, girls and women frequently came to believe that the struggles they faced as individuals are personal problems, rather than political or cultural issues. The sentiment became "everything that is wrong is because of me," rather than questioning the institutional power that created and sustained inequity. Professionally, women's organizations recognized that the establishment of Women's History Month could potentially serve as an index of women's professional accomplishments and future goals. Like coalitions, history brought women together: women that did not always think or act alike, or have the same goals. Working as allies, women (and the organizations they populated) recognized that to fulfill a common goal required assistance and cooperation. However, the diverse coalitions they joined also mirrored ideological challenges within the universe of women. Often reflective of race and socioeconomic, these differences shaped knowledge and experience with power.

Women's History, like Black history and other histories of marginalized groups, exposed the political and social hierarchy that excluded most people: in sharp contrast to the traditional narratives that glorified the small percentage of the world's population, that is so often the sole subject of History - white, heterosexual, educated, economically successful, christian males. For organizations that so frequently found their effectiveness limited by legislative constraints that privileged the interests of men, the establishment of a national Women's History Month offered the opportunity to address the omission of women's equity within political and social structures. Yet, unwittingly, many of the organizations involved in establishing Women's History Month reproduced the same hierarchal structure they wished to dismantle.

## Intervention in Public Spaces: Advocating Participatory Access

Institute participants announced the idea to establish a national women's history commemoration at the final evening gathering. The next day, many of the participants traveled from the Sarah Lawrence College campus in Bronxville, NY to Washington, DC, to attend the closing ceremonies held at the Smithsonian Institution.

The Smithsonian Institution, named as co-sponsor along with WAA and Sarah Lawrence College, initially proposed a much more extensive involvement in the Institute than hosting the closing ceremony. In 1978, led by then-Assistant Curator in the Museum of Political History Edith Mayo, projected plans included a major women's history exhibit in the Museum of History and Technology, to be held concurrently with the Institute. While Director of the Museum of History and Technology Otto Mayr questioned the ability to schedule, plan, and staff the event on relatively short notice, by Smithsonian standards, his major concern focused on the content of the proposed exhibit. Mayr only wanted exhibits that "related to the 'mission' of the Museum of History and Technology." Mayr felt that women's history belonged in the Museum of Political History.<sup>159</sup> Due to budget and time constraints, the Smithsonian's involvement in the Institute then focused on compiling an extensive bibliography of women's history resources to be shared with participants and the public, presenting lectures by Smithsonian staff, and hosting a breakfast awards banquet in Washington DC on the final day of the Institute.

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<sup>159</sup> Edith Mayo, Letter to Ruth Abram and Gerda Lerner, January 3, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Smithsonian Institution, 1979, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. There is no evidence that the exhibit actually developed beyond the early planning phases, which shifted preparations to a proposed 1982 date.

This view of women's history as political is telling and in line with common contemporary perceptions, influencing all factors of the Institute. The radical reputation of WAA and the ongoing feminist movement played a role in the process of obtaining funding for the Institute, both in the foundations approached for funding and the response by funders. Seeking to fulfill a proposed \$102,000 budget, WAA contacted several prominent grant foundations: Rockefeller Foundation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, Atlantic Richfield Foundation, Needmor Fund, Hazen Foundation, Philip Morris, Inc., and the Lilly Endowment. A private philanthropic grant foundation supported by Lilly Pharmaceuticals, dedicated to supporting projects invested in community development, education, and religion, the Lilly Endowment granted \$55,408 to cover Institute expenses throughout 1979.<sup>160</sup> The Institute received no other grant offers.

Lilly's funding conditions and Smithsonian co-sponsorship required press releases to major news outlets. This created a dilemma for WAA and Institute faculty, who wished to maintain a learning experience free of publicity. Both Abram and Institute faculty feared that press involvement would distract participants from the rigorous curriculum and interfere in the desired "retreat-like" environment where all participants experienced equal treatment regardless of the rank held in their respective organization. Aware that media exposure would skew the focus of the Institute, Abram explicitly denied media access during the Institute. Institute faculty members agreed, explicitly stating, "We think it is counter-productive to the

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<sup>160</sup> Memo, grant proposal from Lilly Endowment, Indianapolis, IN, to Women's Action Alliance, October 20, 1978, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Endowment, 1979, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

educational aims to have members of the press or media attend as participants of the Institute.”<sup>161</sup> Invested in publicizing the Institute as a successful coalition, WAA suggested compromises. Only Susan Wisely of the Lilly Endowment and Jo Hartley, writer for WAA’s newsletter *Comment* had access to lectures. The Sarah Lawrence College audio-visual department taped events, for archival purposes.<sup>162</sup> The Smithsonian awards breakfast would be the official press event.

Press coverage of the Institute required strategic negotiations between all of the parties involved. Both the Smithsonian and the Lilly Endowment required approval of all written materials. Each press release focused on the cooperation between WAA and Sarah Lawrence College in creating “a model educational experience.”<sup>163</sup> The call for a National Women’s History Week headlined each press release, though details on implementation were limited. Hired to organize press releases, the Public Interest Public Relations firm arranged for interviews with Abram, Omolade, Institute faculty, and participants after the Smithsonian breakfast. Jim LeMonn’s firm arranged for feature articles to appear in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.<sup>164</sup> Because copies of Abram’s speech at the Smithsonian breakfast

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<sup>161</sup> Gerda Lerner, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Amy Swerdlow, letter to Barbara Omolade, February 16, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Institute Description, 1979, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>162</sup> Note: as a researcher with no affiliation to Sarah Lawrence College, I was unable to view these tapes during my archive visit.

<sup>163</sup> Press Release on awards breakfast at Smithsonian Institution, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Publicity, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>164</sup> Jim LeMonn, letter to Barbara Omolade, August 10, 1979, WAA Records: Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Publicity: PIPR (Public Interest Public Relations), Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. A request by The New York Times “Style” section to visit the Sarah Lawrence campus was declined, reasons unexplained.



and Lerner's opening address to Institute participants were unavailable, press kits were incomplete. Instead, LeMonn met with participants the night before the Smithsonian breakfast, sharing ideas on effectively arranging for hometown coverage of the Institute and its goals.

The day of the Smithsonian breakfast, *Washington Post* reporter Carla Hall interviewed numerous participants. Major newspapers throughout the United States shared these interviews. LeMonn, Abram and Kris Howard (Girls Scouts of America) taped an interview with CBS News correspondent, Anna Mae Sokulsky, to be aired on CBS affiliate stations. LeMonn also arranged follow-up press releases for women's publications, feminist press, and radio interviews, whenever possible featuring local participants in interviews. Participants agreed to follow up attendance at the Institute with additional press releases and interviews, focusing on efforts to establish Women's History Week rather than sharing details about the Institute.

Both Lerner and Omolade later authored articles for *Ms. Magazine*, detailing different aspects of the Institute. Lerner focused on the absence of women in traditional accounts of history, noting, "The absence, in education, of the history of women seriously deprives women," from knowing role models and "a proud heritage from which we can draw inspiration and courage as we face contemporary issues and struggles."<sup>165</sup> Omolade's article for *Ms.* took a more personal tone, reflecting on how various educational topics helped her to re-examine her thinking on the interconnectedness of different women's historical experiences. Omolade valued that participants from very different backgrounds had the opportunity to interact with each, able to "discuss and place our life experiences as private individuals and as public activists

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<sup>165</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Lost from the 'Official' Record," *Ms. Magazine*, December 1979, 109-110.

in a historical context in the seminars.”<sup>166</sup> Included in the *Ms.* article was a handy guide referencing books used by Institute participants and the address to obtain the extensive bibliography compiled by the Smithsonian.<sup>167</sup> A highlighted “Action” textbox embedded within Lerner and Omolade’s feature articles encouraged readers to contact President Jimmy Carter to sign proposed legislation naming the week of March 8 as “Women’s History Week.” Additional information included the contact information for Institute participant Molly MacGregor, who had initially proposed the idea of the commemoration. MacGregor, in her role on the Sonoma County (CA) Commission on the Status of Women would supply any interested parties with an organizing packet, for \$2.50.<sup>168</sup> In a press release sent to Joan Shigekawa (editor, *Ms. Magazine*), Omolade detailed the letter writing campaign agreed to by the Institute participants calling for a National Women’s History Week.<sup>169</sup>

The strategies of activism chosen by the participants of the Institute relied on well-established practices: community building, lobbying, and petitioning legislation. While effective, these strategies did not change institutional systems or hierarchies. Instead, activism devolved into advocating *for* change. This conservative approach to activism had deep roots in both feminism and coalitions. In *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women in Politics Since 1960*, Susan M. Hartmann noted that the emergence of radical feminism in the late 1960s

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<sup>166</sup> Barbara Omolade, “Finding Ourselves... and Each Other,” *Ms. Magazine*, December 1979, 110-112.

<sup>167</sup> Fee for this bibliography containing over 1000 resources: \$2.50, payable to Sarah Lawrence College Women’s Studies department.

<sup>168</sup> Action alert, Editor, *Ms. Magazine*, December 1979, 111.

<sup>169</sup> Press Release, 1979, WAA Records: Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Institute Description, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

created an ideological split between activists. Those connected with NOW and the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) formed a more moderate "reformist" branch, focusing on legislation as the primary tool to institute change. A younger "radical" branch favored protests, consciousness-raising, and alliance with other civil rights activist groups.<sup>170</sup> Reformists worked within patriarchal hierarchies. Radicals sought to dismantle hierarchal organizations and institutions.

The ideological foundation for the Women's History Month commemoration bridged these two branches of feminism. WAA, Institute faculty, the Smithsonian, the Lilly Foundation, and the press used to publicize events adhered to and relied on traditional hierarchal power structures that worked in concert with traditional forms of education and legislation. The participants challenged this hierarchy, first, by disregarding the suggested workshop goals.<sup>171</sup> Then, by proposing a commemorative month that challenged established ideology of History.

This was not unfamiliar territory for Ruth Abram. At the 1976 "Beyond Suffrage" conference to determine the National Women's Agenda, workshops focused on four themes: Building a Network; Conflict; Consensus; and Coalition. Led by Nancy Seifer, the workshop on Coalitions stressed that acknowledgment and understanding of how each woman's education, ethnicity, occupation, and sexual preference influenced her individual understanding of feminist issues. The resulting differences in identities and histories necessitated a development

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<sup>170</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women in Politics Since 1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 63.

<sup>171</sup> Institute participants had the choice of three seminar topics: Women: Life, Life Cycles, and Family Roles; Women in the Economy; or Women in Community and Political Life.

of trust and commitment, as “there is no natural sense of community among women.”<sup>172</sup> As Seifer also noted, men are not required to assume a universal “natural sense of community,” but allowed to be individuals.

History reliably contextualized men’s independent sense of community and entitlement to public space, while generalizing women’s experiences. As a result, women’s community building required development. In *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, Ann Enke argued that between 1960 and 1980, feminist community based activism created new spaces for women by intervening in established public spaces.<sup>173</sup> By developing public spaces like cafes, bookstores, bars, health clinics, and sports events, grounded in the needs and resources of women, society changed through a participatory democracy. In addition, grassroots networks expanded, spreading information and building coalitions between disparate parties. The results of feminist activism became more culturally acceptable, despite challenges to feminist ideology. Legislation validated this cultural shift.

Enke credited the feminist focus on gender and sexuality as essential to the expansion and redefinition of women’s access to public space. “Women’s spaces” gave women the opportunity to gather, to connect through the mutual experience of womanhood. However, as Enke argued, “It is worth considering the ways that gender constructions and exclusions within feminist spaces imported assumptions about class, race, sexuality, and gender expression into

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<sup>172</sup> Undated programming note, Women’s Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Coalitions: National Women’s Agenda Project: Administration; Structure and Planning, Consultation Correspondence and report, 1976, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>173</sup> Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC:Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

feminism itself.”<sup>174</sup> These exclusions also embedded themselves in any coalition, regardless of good intentions.

The participatory structure of coalition offered a reliable foundation for women’s activism to develop this sense of community, regardless of differences. As the founder of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Jewell Jackson McCabe targeted middle class Black women for organizing, noted, “We wanted everyone.” Recognizing that “everything depended on legislation,” McCabe invited women of all ages, in different parts of the United States to join a coalition.<sup>175</sup> Ruth Abram also routinely encouraged organizations to dismiss ideological differences on conservatism, radicalism, and other issues, in favor of overall alliance. At the “Beyond Suffrage” conference in 1976, Abram addressed potential coalition conflicts, acknowledging diversity and consensus as key elements to creating a larger community of action, in order to “give each branch a place in the sun.”<sup>176</sup>

In contrast to McCabe and Abram’s conciliatory messages for unity, Assistant Secretary General to the United Nation’s Social Development and Humanitarian Division, and a key organizer of International Women’s Year, Helvi Sipila, called women to task for complicity in the

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<sup>174</sup> Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 257. Enke is not alone in her critique of feminism’s troubled history with inclusiveness of all aspects of identity. Much of the feminist and historical scholarship focused in any way on gender, race, socioeconomics, and/or sexuality produced in the last 40 years addresses this dynamic in one way or another.

<sup>175</sup> Tracy Washington, producer, “Ms. Edna Beach: Founder of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ps25IRfWk>. Led by Edna Beach, the Coalition of 100 Black Women began with 24 members in 1970. The organization quickly grew to over 500 members, largely by utilizing consciousness raising groups and learning activism techniques from student-led “sit-in” protests that promoted gender and racial equality.

<sup>176</sup> Janis Kelly, Carol Ann Douglas, and Alice Henry, “Women’s Agenda,” *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 8 (Nov 1976): 6.

obstacles many faced, reminding conference attendees that “political rights aren’t toys.”<sup>177</sup> By taking full advantage of the right to vote, and fully considering the implication of any vote, Sipila noted that women could wield tremendous governmental power. Women’s strength need not polarize coalitions with men, but could make use of these connections to further their own ends. Underscoring Sipila’s argument, WAA Board member Eleanor Holmes Norton noted that most men acknowledged the goals of the women’s movement as important and worthy of achievement, even though women had yet to exploit this recognition.<sup>178</sup> Norton viewed this deficiency of action as a lack of development; unaccustomed to wielding political power and unaware of their history of social activism, women relied on legislation to move agendas forward.<sup>179</sup> Largely determined by the men in control, legislative procedures changed laws: not thinking or behaviors.

Access to public resources relied on the good will of men in charge of public institutions. As noted, restrictions placed on the Smithsonian Institution’s involvement underscore the routine assertion of women’s spaces as political spaces subject to parameters set by men. The funding dilemmas faced by the Institute also illustrate a practical barrier to the development of women-centered spaces and coalitions. Grant resources narrowed due to the radical feminist reputation of WAA. Likewise, mainstream media resources neglected to cover the Institute. Publicity for the Institute and the proposed women’s history commemoration lacked coverage,

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<sup>177</sup> Janis Kelly, “Women’s Agenda,” 8.

<sup>178</sup> Janis Kelly, “Women’s Agenda,” 8.

<sup>179</sup> At the time of this conference, Norton specialized in discrimination against women cases in her role as ACLU lawyer. President Jimmy Carter later named Norton as the first Director of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Norton has served as Congressional delegate for Washington D.C. since 1991.

remaining limited to media outlets friendly to the feminist movement and/or liberal agendas: chiefly *Ms. Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.<sup>180</sup>

### Diversified Experiences: The Effect of Personal Identities

In her post-Institute summary submitted to the Lilly Endowment, Omolade stated, “The personal is political is a truth exemplified by the Institute.”<sup>181</sup> Omolade noted the three Institute goals in her report: to elevate the importance of women’s history within women’s organizations and the nation; to make women’s history an integral part of the programs and consciousness of women’s organizations; and to increase awareness of all barriers to full participation of women with particular attention to those of race and class.<sup>182</sup> These goals provided a template for Institute participants and their respective organizations to utilize information and initiate plans of action that developed as a result of the Institute.

Newly installed as executive director of WAA, Omolade modeled post-Institute plans on previous methods familiar to coalition members. The development of pamphlets, newsletters, and other educational material to share with other organization members was key to spreading information and relatively simple to accomplish. On a slightly more expansive scale, Omolade wanted Institute participants to organize lectures and slide shows, create archives of

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<sup>180</sup> In the 1970s, “Pravda on the Potomac” was commonly used by political conservatives to describe the *Washington Post*, which was controlled by Katharine Graham.

<sup>181</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 17, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>182</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 1, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

organization materials, and/or outline a campaign to include women's history in school and library curriculums.<sup>183</sup> Omolade also proposed wide-ranging projects that required extensive networking. These projects included creating school and library education projects, traveling exhibits that featured organizational histories at the local and state level, lectures on women's histories given at annual meetings of national groups (PTA, churches, etc.), and lobbying national foundations to include women's historians on their faculty. Traveling museum exhibits held at state and regional levels could highlight the value of local organizations in lobbying for societal changes. Omolade also suggested a campaign to develop and promote a television series on women's history. Feature films, documentaries, and television series had the potential to develop histories of many women, including the lesser-known experiences of Black, Indigenous, and additional women of color. An alternative to the television series would be a syndicated radio program on women's history. Seemingly lofty outcomes from a two week summer intensive on women's history.

Most Institute participants followed Omolade's plan, to a certain extent. Letter-writing campaigns undertaken by various organizations met with success in establishing women's history celebrations in Colorado, Iowa, and Connecticut.<sup>184</sup> Other organizations developed material on women's history, from establishing archives to newsletters. A participant from the National Abortion Rights Action League authored a newsletter with suggested state (Illinois) events. A participant from the National Committee on Household Employment encouraged donation of organizational records to the National Council of Negro Women's Archives on Black

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<sup>183</sup> Barbara Omolade and Ruth Abram, Letter to Institute faculty, description of Institute schedule, February 28, 1979, Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Institute Description, 1979, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>184</sup> Participants agreed to write on women's history, not on events pertaining to the Institute.



Women's History. The director of the ACLU's Southern Rights Legal Project began teaching a Black women's history course to women in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>185</sup> As Omolade noted in the Lilly report, the changes inspired by participation in the Institute extended beyond the individual, as "The full impact of the Institute in terms of reaching its stated goals and developing an enthusiastic network of women leaders committed to linking their present work with women's history has begun, but is yet to be fully realized."<sup>186</sup>

Omolade also acknowledged significant representational gaps in the structuring of the Institute. National women's health and sports organizations, as well as coalitions focused on older women and differently abled women had not been included. In addition, programming and educational material directed at the history of Black, indigenous, and women of color lacked sufficient coverage.

Realizing the inadvertent exclusions shortly before the Institute opening, WAA and faculty attempted different strategies to overcome the lack of attendance by representatives of organizations of color. WAA approached individual Black, indigenous, and women of color activists, but the inability to provide supplementary funding to cover travel expenses and/or work absences proved an insurmountable obstacle for many. As a result, participants representing Latina, Asian, and Native American organizations could not attend the Institute. Institute faculty did not include scholars and teachers who were women of color, a fact noted by many participants in exit surveys. A last minute addition to the evening lecture program

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<sup>185</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 2, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>186</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 3, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

organized an “Ethnic Women’s History Panel,” attempted to alleviate this tension. This panel, chaired by Omolade, attempted to fill a void of information in just a few hours. Funding limitations prevented Clara Sue Kidwell (Native American historian), Grace Lee Boggs (Asian American scholar), and Lupe Castillo (Chicana historian) from attending and joining the panel. As compensation for the lack of racial history, participants received bibliographies of recommended topical books added to their post-Institute reading lists.<sup>187</sup>

With the expectation that organizations would “support their nominee’s programmatic suggestions,” WAA chose participants based on their privileged status within their respective organizations: presidents, executive directors, board members, high-level program staff, founders, or long-term volunteers.<sup>188</sup> Overall, the student-body of the Institute reflected a theoretically diverse yet practical homogenized preference: “We wanted women to be able to participate as equals and peers with other women, irrespective of their backgrounds or life styles.”<sup>189</sup> As a result, diversity remained a desired concept rather than an actualized reality. WAA made no public requests for individual applicants. Yet, some individuals did contact either WAA or Institute faculty requesting an invitation to participate in the Institute. A few became eligible after affirming their connection to major women’s organizations.

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<sup>187</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 5, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>188</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 6, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>189</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 6, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

Omolade's report to the Lilly Endowment overwhelmingly referenced the experiences of women of color at the Institute, noting, "The group's diversity allowed exploration of perspectives from women of different class, race, culture, and sexual preference."<sup>190</sup> However, participants noted the absence of more "controversial" issues - gay rights, domestic violence, sterilization, and childcare alternatives, from the curriculum. Often viewed as "fringe" issues, organization leaders and educators frequently and expediently compromised these topics as priorities, in favor of more "majority" issues: establishing equal rights for employment, wages, education, and reproductive rights focused on preventing pregnancy. Participants did find their consciousness of women's history and women's reality elevated both by the provided educational material and lived experience at the Institute. One participant cited by Omolade's report claimed, "...the two aspects of equal value which the Institute offered were the study of women's history with wonderful teachers and role models, and the opportunity to get to know so many wonderful women activists from such a diversity of organizations."<sup>191</sup> Other participants shared similar sentiments, saying, "A new network is being developed and women are caring and guiding other women. The contacts and emotional ties will enable me to enhance the work of the Institute."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 7, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>191</sup> Barbara Omolade, Grant report to Susan Wisely, Lilly Foundation, dated February 25, 1980, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Lilly Foundation, 7, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>192</sup> Unnamed participant, feedback on Institute, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Evaluations, 1979, part 4 of 4, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

Some participants learned through what was absent. A participant representing Church Women United reflected, “We know that the structure and content of teaching history reflects and sustains bias. Such bias does untold damage to those who are ‘left out’ of history by depriving them of a context in which to place their experience or setting up an alien context against which they must measure their experience. We know this is so, because it is what happens to women in male-dominated history - in textbooks, in classrooms, in teaching. That is why it is so important to lift up women’s history, so that the holes in our knowledge won’t be so large.”<sup>193</sup> As this participant acknowledged, by attempting to bridge some of the education gaps of women’s history, the Institute created others. Most of the lectures focused on white, middle-class women’s history. Lectures on “other” women referenced “blacks and other minorities,” causing one Chicana participant to remind everyone, “Hey folks, I’m an ‘other.’ Remember me?”<sup>194</sup> In a post-Institute reflection to WAA, Rosemarie Quesada acknowledged the valuable opportunity attendance at the Institute represented, because of the connections made with other women. Quesada noted, “As a woman of color, I could not relate to a large portion of the history, especially since Chicanas were not even recognized as being alive in the history presented. However, as a woman, I could very much relate to what I saw as our common women’s history.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Church Women’s United, Post-Institute feedback, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Evaluations, 1979, part 2 of 4, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>194</sup> Church Women’s United, Post-Institute feedback, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Evaluations, 1979, part 2 of 4, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>195</sup> Rosemarie Quesada, Letter to Ruth Abram, Barbara Omolade, and the Women’s Alliance, August 12, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Correspondence Post-conference, 1979-80, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

As a gathering space for community building, participants became aware of other women's experiences: both historically and in the present. Participants absorbed scholarly research that grounded the interests and goals of their various organizations in past events and current problems. Participants also bonded over common goals. However, the structure of the Institute also represented a familiar expediency: a convenient, practical approach to building a coalition of women's organizations invested in the topic of women's history, but limited by a failure to adequately understand and implement structural changes of inclusion.

Despite Lerner's commitment to scholarship on Black women and social class, despite WAA's investment in developing diverse coalitions, and despite increasingly intersectional feminist activism, the Institute missed valuable opportunities to be inclusive. Instead, the Institute reflected a reliance on the benefits of patriarchy historically granted exclusively to white women. White women's ready access to white men in homes and bedrooms, in businesses, churches, and politics (as support staff) created opportunities to demand that men live up to stated ideals of equality, or risk having their lives be made more difficult. Adherence to established norms and values regulated the practices required for the passing of legislation that, in theory, supported necessary changes. Change happened by working with other interested parties to apply necessary pressure. When men felt no need to negotiate (especially if it led to a loss of power), white women relied on coalitions of manipulation. Media campaigns, influential partnerships, and legislative compromises attempted to convince men that shared power brought more prestige, while also protecting the power already held by men.

Black women activists did not have the same negotiating advantages as white women. The National Black Feminist Organization noted in its 1973 mission statement, “Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being both black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist.”<sup>196</sup> Race acted as a greater barrier to accessing power than gender. While seeking racial justice through education, voting rights, and economic equity, Black women’s activism required different techniques. Political and social activism focused on civil disobedience as the method for change, actions that frequently placed women in physical danger. Surveillance, incarceration, and the threat of sexual violence were routine and unchallenged by any authority. Historians Daina Berry Raimey and Kali Nicole Gross concurred that, “For many African American women, civil rights was inextricably linked to respect for and protective of their womanhood. They fought for this acknowledgment in ways great and small.”<sup>197</sup> Often, this necessitated putting their very bodies on the line to draw attention to the discrimination faced by their race.

Notwithstanding the solidarity reflected by hundreds of partnerships within WAA, and proposed as a key component of the Institute, race presented the most significant barrier in all women’s coalitions. The term “feminism” carried an undeniable association with white, middle-class, east coast, educated women, despite its historically accurate association to the Civil Rights Movement. Even the most well intentioned progressive white feminists struggled with recognizing their role in sustaining the systemic nature of racism. Unconscious biases, individual prejudice, and learned white privilege interfered in an understanding of racial

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<sup>196</sup> Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 197-198.

<sup>197</sup> Berry and Gross, *A Black Women’s History*, 177.

differences. The disadvantages of race supported the same institutional hierarchy as patriarchy. While working diligently to change a gendered coordination of unequal power and privilege, white women's coalitions routinely maintained racial stereotypes and omitted Black women from organizational positions of efficacy.

Omolade, hired by WAA in 1977 to direct the Non-sexist Child Development Project, and later worked on the Sarah Lawrence Institute on Women's History Project, acknowledged the sustained severity of racial discrimination within WAA's internal staff: "Racism at the Alliance is pervasive, subtle, and devious, permeating policy directions, program implementations, and interpersonal relationships. It makes effective work from Black women a minor miracle."<sup>198</sup> Omolade viewed her role at WAA and the Institute as a go-between, navigating the fraught tensions between gender and race, often playing the role of mediator or interpreter. When a Puerto Rican clerical employee lost her job for taking files home over the weekend to work on, Omolade and other staff protested to executive director Abram. As a result, a Personnel Advisory Committee formed to generate clear policies.<sup>199</sup> No other restructuring or education of WAA staff occurred.

Even while advocating for the removal of gender, racial, and socioeconomic barriers, the white women leaders remained comfortably entrenched in their privilege. The everyday oppression experienced by their Black "sisters" was not the experience of white women. While white feminists certainly informed themselves about structural reasons for inequality (based in hierarchy and patriarchy), their personal privilege offered daily protections from living with the

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<sup>198</sup> Barbara Omolade, "Sisterhood in Black and White," in *The Feminist Memoir Project*, eds., Rachel Blau dePlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 387. Omolade resigned from WAA in frustration in 1980.

<sup>199</sup> Omolade, "Sisterhood in Black and White," 386.

effects of racism. As twin sisters and founders of the Combahee River Collective Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith noted, women's oppression and racial oppression manifest differently.<sup>200</sup> Women's oppression happens gradually, with a cumulative effect on a women's life experience and opportunities. Racial oppression begins at birth and has no options: "You're born into it and it's grinding."<sup>201</sup> Any involvement in public space reinforces the experience of oppression, for the oppressed and the oppressor, resulting in a systematic reproduction of inequality. Likewise, socioeconomic oppression complicates this inequality. When caught in the cycle of poverty, the effects are as inescapable as the oppression of race.<sup>202</sup>

Asked by Moraga and Anzaldua to examine the pervasiveness of white middle class women in the feminist movement, the Smiths used education as an example. White middle class women could choose, or not, to further their education (formally or informally), with the assurance of benefitting from a racial association with the (perceived) success of white men. In order to be recognized even minimally as an authority, Black women had to acquire status through formal education.<sup>203</sup> However, white middle class women set the agendas of women's organizations regardless of their expertise, or political and economic accomplishments. Achievement marked viability and success. To be included in these organizations or coalitions, Black women must adapt and comply. This hierarchal structure persisted throughout the long history of the women's movement (abolition, suffrage, labor), continually protecting white

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<sup>200</sup> Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister to Sister Dialogue," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds., Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 112.

<sup>201</sup> Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table," 112.

<sup>202</sup> The Smith's also jokingly reference heterosexuality as oppressive, 113.

<sup>203</sup> Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table," 114.



women's domination of organizations and histories of the women's movement, often by redefining the experiences of Black women through a white lens. Recognizing that a white middle class movement cannot address the concerns of all women, the Smith's wondered, "What is the nature of those issues that get multi-oppressed women involved in movement work," and "how might those issues be incorporated into the women's movement?" These activists made clear that universalizing women's experiences obscured the structure of oppression used to historicize women's lives. This marginalization, unintentional as it may be, served the hierarchal order of all institutions.

### Conclusion

Overall, most of the participants of the Institute determined the event to be a resounding success at bringing together women from different coalitions to learn about women's history. Many asked for additional programming, eager for more opportunities to gather in community: to learn, to share ideas, and to build stronger coalitions.

Many participants recognized the significant practical barriers inherent in the Institute structure, also recognizing these same challenges in the study of history and in their lived experiences. Beyond the complications of ideological differences, time and financial restraints also limited participation in the Institute. The Institute could only accommodate a small number of students. Nor were all applicants admitted. Not every organization invited to attend the Institute could afford to send participants. Organizations with extensive political, economic, and cultural influence may have been overburdened with other commitments (time and money related), limited staff to handle additional projects, or opposing/lack of interest. In

organizations heavily reliant on volunteer services, women's family and job obligations created further complications. National organizations also routinely scheduled conferences during the summer months, in response to the family commitments of staff and volunteers. In addition, participants representing extensive national women's organizations like NOW, AAUW, and the League of Women Voters were limited to sending a single representative to the Institute. As a result, one participant carried the responsibility of interpreting and depicting the value of advocating for the establishment of a women's history commemoration to an entire organization.

Daunting and exciting, when viewed through the lens of potential.

An Institute coalesced around the celebration of women's history attended by representatives of national women's organizations hosted by respected women's historians and a national alliance of women's coalitions begets a plan to establish a national commemoration of women's history. What a practical feminist concept: one that had the potential to blend theoretical ideas of equality, representation and hierarchal constructions of validity into workable, useful, every day, real world, concretely applied action, and made use of already established coalitions.

The concept of Women's History Month acted as an immediate way to strengthen coalition networks, giving organizations with disparate interests and needs a common ground to build from. Every organization had its own history, its own story to tell: a story of the women involved in activism and a story of facing obstacles, learning, and potentially, overcoming challenges and creating change. The sharing of these stories deepened coalitions.

## CHAPTER IV

### LEGISLATING WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH: BENEFITS AND BACKLASH

*Women's history is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women... Women's history changes their lives. Even short-term exposure to the past experience of women, such as in two-week institutes and seminars, has the most profound psychological effect on women participants.*<sup>204</sup>

On July 31, 1979, two days after the Institute ended, Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder (D-CO) launched the alliance by including references to the Institute in an address to the House of Representatives. Schroeder noted details of Institute curriculum, reading the list of “sisterships” received by each participant into the Congressional Record. These “sisterships” paired Institute participants with a notable woman from history. Schroeder commended WAA and its coalition members, the Smithsonian Institution, Sarah Lawrence faculty members, and participants for “helping to spread the word about the beliefs and efforts of our foremothers.”<sup>205</sup> Schroeder’s acknowledgment of the value of the Institute launched the beginning of a sustained operation of letter writing, phone calls, and visits to Washington D.C. officials by Institute participants: all with the goal of gaining a formal legislative proclamation for the national celebration of Women’s History Week, during the week of March 2-8, 1980.

Legislation represented a useful, accessible tool for coalitions. At its best, legislation represented a means to change perceptions of importance and value, to rally support for a common goal, and operated as a means to legitimize a position. The often-extensive process of

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<sup>204</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>205</sup> Patricia Schroeder, *United States Congressional Record*, 96th Congress, First Session, Vol. 125, No. 108, August 1, 1979.

establishing legislation formalized ideas, giving more political and cultural weight to a concept. Supporters of Women's History Month recognized that Black History Month gained legitimacy after receiving a formal proclamation by President Gerald Ford in February 1976. In turn, Black History Month gained popularity through its usefulness to education. State Departments of Education and churches promoted literature on Black history. Black media sources also distributed information, sometimes picked up by mainstream media. Black communities embraced their history, and used these narratives to challenge conventional histories. Through the authority of his role as Dean of Human Relations, Dr. Milton E. Wilson (Kent State University) instituted Black History Month in 1970, in response to student requests. Sponsored by Kent State's Institute for African American Affairs, the Human Relations Center, and the Black United Students, a month-long celebration featured performances and exhibits in the Black Culture Center on the Kent State campus.<sup>206</sup> Proponents of Women's History Month hoped for similar results.

Legislation also validated an idea or proposal through normalization: an implied standardization or practice. Schroeder's inclusion of the Institute proceedings in the Congressional Record ensured a reference to women's history in the legislative process, while also alluding to its routine exclusion. By introducing language about the Institute into the Congressional Record, Schroeder gave participants an entry point from which to further legislative acknowledgement.

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<sup>206</sup> Lou Veal, "'Black History Month' begins with opening of culture center," *Daily Kent Stater*, Volume LV, Number 52, February 3, 1970, Kent State University. <https://dks.library.kent.edu/cgi-bin/kentstate?a=d&d=dks19700203-01.2.10&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->.

Seeking expediency and perceiving the success of Black History Month, participants focused on obtaining a Presidential Proclamation. Used to announce policy, presidential proclamations deemed valuable matters of public interest. There are two types: “ceremonial,” to designate special observances, and “substantive,” enforcing international trade, tariffs, exports, and federal land reservations.<sup>207</sup> A ceremonial Presidential Proclamation designated the commemoration of women’s history as significant, a matter of importance politically and publicly.

Of course, any legislative step forward to benefit one party becomes a challenge to others. A change in status quo disrupts entrenched expectations and ideology. Reactions differ from voiced opposition to counter-acting measures, often dependent on the perceived political risk or threat. Subject to public opinion, backlash to institutional policy changes reflect a reluctance, or sometimes, outright defiance to promote or validate social progress. In order to withstand or overcome the resulting backlash, majority support for the legislation has to take precedence. Timing of legislation is also important, both as a matter of developing public will and interest, and in minimizing political consequences.

From the outset, the campaign to gain legislative acknowledgement of a national women’s history commemoration relied on the spirit of coalition: interested parties working together to accomplish a goal. The process of obtaining legislative approval also reflected the political climate of the late 1970s and 1980s. During this era, women and other civil rights activists increasingly demanded recognition of their political and social rights. In contrast, this era is also defined by the rise of the Religious Right, a christian conservative movement that

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<sup>207</sup> Amy Bunk, “Federal Register 101,” Office of National Archives and Records Administration, [www.federalregister.gov](http://www.federalregister.gov), 56.

claimed the need to protect society from “moral decline” as the reason for opposing social changes. Favoring paternalistic political and social policies that strictly controlled access to reproductive rights, school attendance, and unrestricted business practices, the Religious Right formed a strong coalition with like-minded organizations: the Moral Majority, the Heritage Foundation, and the Phyllis Schlafly-led Eagle Forum. Founder of the Heritage Foundation, Paul Weyrich recognized the efficiency of the moral majority, stating, “The new political philosophy must be defined by us [conservatives] in moral terms, packaged in non-religious language, and propagated throughout the country by our new coalition. When political power is achieved, the moral majority will have the opportunity to re-create this great nation.”<sup>208</sup>

Women’s coalitions also recognized that educational equity was strategic to obtaining and growing institutional power. Institutional power supported equitable representation. Calling for equality was not enough. Equality offered access alone, as a comparison of value and worth. Equity was the goal: developing fair distribution of assets that assisted in establishing and sustaining parity. A culmination of decades of education activism and legislation efforts to overcome discrimination on the basis of sex, Women’s History Month represented a potential valuable tool in establishing educational equity.

#### Educational Equity Policy: “We Never Considered Its Effect”

Just as the establishment of land grant universities and the GI bill made education accessible for diverse populations after World War II, supporters of educational equity in the

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<sup>208</sup> Randal Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right,” *Politico Magazine*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133>.

1970s and early 1980s understood the long-term impact of representative curricula and pedagogy as a transformational undertaking. Inclusive education practices had the potential for removing cultural and political barriers of gender. The spotlight on inequality resonated with arguments made within the women's movement and tied into the civil right arguments used by African Americans, gays, pro-life proponents, animal and environmental protectionists, and education activists that began in the 1960s.<sup>209</sup> Viewed as key to removing gender, racial, and economic barriers, equal opportunity reverberated as a central tenet of American civil society. The struggle to obtain rights was a proven political and cultural motivator, often prompting interaction between varying collective action movements.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act first introduced "sex discrimination" into the American vocabulary. Southern congressional representatives included "sex discrimination" as a joke in the language of the bill, in an effort to kill the entire Civil Rights Act. Congresswoman Martha Griffiths (MI) recognized the significance of including sex-based protection, however. Griffiths argued that by excluding sex-based discrimination from the language of the legislation, white men would once again be limiting white women to a lesser place in society, just as they had during Reconstruction.<sup>210</sup> Through the lobbying efforts of Griffiths and several other Congresswomen, the language of "sex" remained in the bill.

This had monumental consequences for higher education, and became the foundation on which to build Title IX. As Griffiths noted, colleges and universities that limited women's access to an education as well as academic employment received billions of federal dollars

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<sup>209</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>210</sup> Martha Wright Griffiths, *United States House of Representatives, History, Art, & Archives*, <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/14160>.

every year, yet limited women's access to education. The quota system used for college admissions required women to meet higher standards than men. For example, in the late 1960s, admission guidelines for the University of North Carolina explicitly stated, "admission of women on the freshman level is 'restricted to those who are especially well-qualified.'" Based on similar policy, the state of Virginia denied college admission to twenty-one thousand women, while no male students were rejected. Across the US, women graduate students levels were below those of 1930. While women made up forty percent of the faculty at community and private colleges, only one-tenth of the faculties at prestigious Big Ten universities were female. When hired, women faculty members were routinely denied tenure. At every professorial level, women earned less than men did. Women rarely administered academic departments.<sup>211</sup>

Section 702 of the Civil Rights Act exempted "every educational institution with respect to the employment of individuals to perform work connected with the educational activities of such institution."<sup>212</sup> This exclusion prompted Dr. Bernice (Bunny) Sandler to file the first lawsuits against colleges and universities in the early 1970s. Sandler's lawsuit noted, "Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we didn't hear that much about discrimination: people talked about prejudice. The Civil Rights Act was important linguistically because it gave us the terms race

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<sup>211</sup> Mary W. Gray, "The AAUP and Women," *Academe: Washington* 101, no.1 (Jan/Feb 2015): 47.

<sup>212</sup> Civil Rights Act, 1964, Section 702: EXEMPTION SEC. 702. This title shall not apply to an employer with respect to the employment of aliens outside any State, or to a religious corporation, association, or society with respect to the employment of individuals of a particular religion to perform work connected with the carrying on by such corporation, association, or society of its religious activities or to an educational institution with respect to the employment of individuals to perform work connected with the educational activities of such institution. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, [https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/civil\\_rights\\_act.html](https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/civil_rights_act.html). This exemption contradicted the 1963 Equal Pay Act, an amendment to Fair Labor Standards Act established in 1938.



discrimination and sex discrimination. The Civil Rights Act began to publicly define discrimination. We didn't have the word sexism until about 1973 or 1974." Sandler's own academic frustrations fueled her activism.<sup>213</sup> Sandler began her career as a part-time lecturer at the University of Maryland. Denied tenure-track positions because "you come on too strong for a woman" and "you're not really a professor, just a housewife who went back to school," Sandler began to search the existing laws that referenced sex equity. Sandler argued that the ability to identify sexism relies on identification and differentiation: "If you don't have a label for it, like the words sex discrimination, it's very hard to think about it. When you start to have names for things, you no longer see it as your particular or individual experience, but it is now part of a pattern."<sup>214</sup>

Using an obscure footnote in the Fair Labor Standards Act that prohibited sex discrimination, Sandler and a small group of supporters filed more than 250 lawsuits on behalf of women experiencing sex discrimination in academia, in January 1970. Sandler also became a member of the Subcommittee on Higher Education of the Education and Labor, chaired by Representative Edith Green (Oregon). Green, first elected in 1955, had long been a proponent of women's equitable education measures. Green authored the Higher Education Facilities Act (1963), which expanded and improved college libraries, laboratories, and classrooms. Green also wrote the Higher Education Act (1965), which authorized federal financial aid assistance for undergraduates, and revised the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (1965), which ensured employment-training opportunities.

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<sup>213</sup> Katherine Hanson, Vivian Guilfooy, and Sarita Pillai, *More than Title IX: How Equity in Education has Shaped the Nation* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 16.

<sup>214</sup> Hanson, et al, *More than Title IX*, 17.

Guided by her interest in establishing pay equity and gender equality in postsecondary education, Representative Green worked on passage of the 1963 Equal Pay Act. At the time of its historic enactment, Green questioned why a bill that acknowledged that women deserved the same pay as a man for doing the same work took eight years to pass. Informed by this experience, Green worked with Representative Patsy Mink (HI) to draft the bill that would become Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Green and Mink deliberately used language from the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Green cautioned Sandler (in her role as director of Project on the Status and Education of Women) about bringing too much attention to the bill: attention would bring unwanted amendments.<sup>215</sup> Green prefaced her supervision of the Title IX hearings by saying, “Let us not deceive ourselves. Our educational institutions have proven to be no bastions of democracy.” For example, the president of the American Council on Education continued to claim that “there was no sexism in higher education—and even if there was, so what,” despite the 1200+ pages of data and testimony provided by Sandler and others that confirmed hiring discrimination, lower wages, and an absence of benefits as a routine practice.

Representative Patsy Mink (HI) also led the Congressional hearing process for Title IX. Mink had experienced both racial and sex discrimination as a college student. Denied admission to medical school because of her gender, Mink enrolled in law school. In 1965, Mink became the first woman of color elected to Congress, joining Green and Sandler on the

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<sup>215</sup> Sandler founded the Project on the Status and Education of Women (PSEW) in 1971, as an organization dedicated to resolving gender equality issues within the education system. Through a published newsletter and informative material, PSEW advocated equity policies based on the needs of university students, faculty, staff, and administrators. PSEW focused primarily on affirmative action measures, hiring practices, and the development of women’s studies programs. In 1991, PSEW became Association of American Colleges and Universities, which continues to promote and defend liberal education policies for over 1300 colleges and universities.

Committee on Education and Labor. As one of only eight female members of Congress, Mink quickly realized that, “I had a special burden to bear to speak for all women because they didn’t have people who could express their concerns for them adequately.”<sup>216</sup> Guided by Green and Mink, the Education Act of 1972 quietly passed through the House of Representatives. Birch Bayh of Indiana directed the Education Act through the Senate. When introducing the legislation to the Senate body, Bayh quoted Virginia Allen, chair of President Richard Nixon’s Task Force on Women’s Rights and Responsibilities, saying, “Women do not seek special privileges. They do seek equal rights. They do wish to assume their full responsibilities. Equality for women is unalterably linked to many broader questions of social justice.”<sup>217</sup> With assurances that beauty pageants could still award scholarships “based on skill” and that football would maintain a “no women allowed” policy, the Senate passed Title IX legislation on June 23, 1972.

The protections offered by Title IX were extensive, ensuring admittance of women and girls to any education program. This meant that financial aid, classes, housing, health services, counseling were now equally available to women and girls. Pregnancy was no longer a reason for expulsion. Sports programs for women and girls developed and/or expanded. Following new guidelines, school counselors adjusted their career advising to encourage girls’ interest in math and science, as well as non-traditional occupations. Employment protections included hiring and wage assurances, ensured office assignments, and barred sexual harassment. As a result, Title IX provided a legal foundation for educational equity.

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<sup>216</sup> Patsy T. Mink, *Oral History Interview*, March 6 1979, March 26 1979, and June 7 1979, United States Air Force Media Operations Center, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.: 43.

<sup>217</sup> Virginia Allen, “A Matter of Simple Justice:” *The Report on the President’s Task Force on Women’s Rights and Responsibilities*, April 1970, [cdn.nixonlibrary.org › wp-content › uploads › 2017/08, 3](https://cdn.nixonlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/3).

However, in order to guarantee lasting policy change, the Title IX educational programs required sufficient funding to establish equity-focused teaching programs and training aimed at teachers, administrators and librarians. Public information and outreach programs also needed development. Shortly before passage of Title IX, a clerk for the House Education subcommittee on which Mink served, approached Sandler with an idea to fund women's studies programs. Through personal experience, Arlene Horowitz knew that education was the means of circumventing sex discrimination, of overcoming lower wages and challenging work conditions. Ignoring threats of job loss due to her involvement with the women's rights movement, Horowitz drafted the initial language of what was to become the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA).<sup>218</sup>

Mink and Sandler first viewed Horowitz's idea as a means to use congressional influence to spark changes in textbooks, noting, "If we had testimony on how bad and sexist the textbooks were... then the publishers would be nervous... and they might produce better books."<sup>219</sup> Meetings with other feminists quickly expanded the possibilities of WEEA to include the development of women's studies and women's history programs, as well as sex discrimination training for teachers, administrators, and counselors. WEEA served as the instrument to ensure the success of Title IX.

Public support for the WEEA was widespread. Sponsoring the bill in the House, Mink introduced dozens of letters from backers, all stating that the Act would rectify the severe inequalities present in education. Congressional co-signers recognized that even though both

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<sup>218</sup> Horowitz initially drafted the proposal for what would become WEEA in 1970-1. This was a long-term effort for education equity activists.

<sup>219</sup> Hanson, *More than Title IX*, 16.

Congressional houses had supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the legislation needed ratification.<sup>220</sup> WEEA would fill this gap in legislation. While efforts to “sensitize” people to sex discrimination were underway, funding was necessary to educate the public about the importance of an education that honored the experiences and needs of both women and men. Members of the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession agreed, arguing, “For too long we have assumed that history consists of what men have traditionally done – politics, war, international relations. Leaving out the women slights a large part of our population, to be sure; but it also means that we neglect large segments of our history – for instance, history of the family, or of voluntary organizations – that we would do well to understand.”<sup>221</sup>

Sparsely attended hearings for WEEA’s passage occurred in the summer of 1973. This was a political maneuver instrumented by Mink, who did not want to attract attention in order to avoid unwanted additions to the bill. Assumed as a minor piece of legislation, little debate occurred. The WEEA went quietly into effect in 1974, providing funding for over 800 education-related projects.

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<sup>220</sup> First written by Alice Paul in 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) sought to guarantee equal legal rights for all Americans. Political favor for the proposed constitutional amendment grew throughout the following decades, reaching a peak in the early 1970s. Approved by the House of Representative in 1971 and by the Senate in 1972, the amendment went to the states for ratification, with a deadline set for March 22, 1979. Despite overwhelming public and legislative support, and ratification by 35 of the necessary 38 states, conservative activism stalled its progress. Led by Phyllis Schlafly and members of her Eagle Forum, conservative women argued that ERA legislation would hinder rights for married women. Some states tried to revoke their ratification as a result. Since 2010, Illinois, Nevada, and Virginia have brought the ratification total to the necessary 38. However, the legality of the ratification process remains in dispute. Legislation for the ERA has been introduced into every Congress since 1982. Allison Held, Sheryl Herndon, and Danielle Stager, “Summary of “The Equal Rights Amendment: Why the ERA Remains Legally Viable and Properly Before the States,” *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, Spring 1997, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140127031352/http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/strategy.htm#Summary>.

<sup>221</sup> Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 117.

One of the most visible projects of the WEEA was the National Women's History Project (NWHP). Benefiting from WEEA funding, the National Women's History Project produced informational material on women's history. Led by Institute participant Molly MacGregor, NWHP was instrumental in organizing extensive support for Women's History Week/Month. Teachers and librarians utilized the extensive bibliography lists on women's history published by NWHP, as well as posters and buttons available at a nominal cost. Local and state legislators shared NWHP-produced videos and programming kits at commemoration events.<sup>222</sup>

Supported by a large network of activists and educators, WEEA modeled its education programs after Title IV of the Civil Rights Act that required desegregation. The benefits of integrating educational equity into curriculum mirrored the argument of *Brown v. Board of Education*: separate is not equal. Programming focused on women of color, women with disabilities, women in poverty, women in leadership, as well as education policy. Leslie Wolfe led the agency, insuring that WEEA projects benefitted schools, colleges, universities, community agencies, and workplaces through development grants. The Women's Resource Center (part of the global Education Development Center) assisted WEEA on local projects, using film and print media resources to link WEEA grantees with local individuals, schools, libraries, and universities invested in gender equity.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Chapter 5 will cover NWHP more extensively.

<sup>223</sup> Hanson, *More than Title IX: How Equity in Education has Shaped the Nation*, 11.

## Coordinating Women's History Month Proposals with Legislative Efforts

Following her role as a graduate student assisting in the administration of the Institute, Pam Elam threw herself wholeheartedly into the task of contacting both legislative officials and organization leaders on behalf of obtaining a ceremonial Presidential Proclamation from Jimmy Carter. Directly after the Institute, Elam began corresponding with Molly MacGregor and other Institute participants, organizing efforts to “bring the National Women’s History Week Resolution to life.”<sup>224</sup> While motivated in part by using her work as the basis of a graduate practicum for her Sarah Lawrence College Women’s History degree, as an ardent feminist, Elam also recognized the historic potential of establishing Women’s History Month. Acting as general coordinator for the practicum, Elam and seven other students proposed a two-semester schedule focused on mobilizing support and lobbying federal Congress members. Sarah Lawrence College student Peggy Pascoe took on the responsibility for applying “presidential pressure.”<sup>225</sup>

By early November 1979, lobbying efforts showed promise. Elam and Pascoe reported to Lerner (who oversaw their practicum) that Representative Barbara Mikulski agreed to sponsor a House of Representatives resolution.<sup>226</sup> Staff members of the Congressional Women’s Caucus arranged to work with the legislative counsel’s office to format the resolution

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<sup>224</sup> Pam Elam, Graduate Program Practicum outline to Gerda Lerner, October 15, 1979, National Women’s History Week Papers 1979-80, Institute on Women’s History, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College, Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Bronxville, NY.

<sup>225</sup> Pam Elam, Graduate Program Practicum outline to Gerda Lerner, October 15, 1979, addendum, National Women’s History Week Papers 1979-80, Institute on Women’s History, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College, Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Bronxville, NY.

<sup>226</sup> Institute supporter and Representative Schroeder declined on principle, objecting to all resolutions.

correctly. Caucus members promised to draft a letter of support from all women members of Congress to send to Carter. Carter's staff members also agreed to make the president aware of the timely nature of the measure. Between October 1979-March 1980, Elam and Pascoe placed over one hundred calls to the President's Advisory Commission on Women and congressional leaders to put pressure on Carter to endorse the celebration. Additional phone calls and correspondence went to MacGregor, WAA, and other Institute participants to coordinate lobbying efforts.<sup>227</sup>

Elam coordinated a letter writing campaign using WAA's National Women's Agenda coalition alert system, urging members to contact legislative officials. The request received a mixed response. The presidents of several organizations reacted enthusiastically, drafting letters to President Carter.<sup>228</sup> Some letters encouraged Carter to fulfill well-publicized political promises. Shirley Leviton, president of the National Council of Jewish Women noted the value of recognizing "the contributions of women from diverse cultures to the development of American society."<sup>229</sup> Leviton and other organization leaders also noted that issuing the proclamation during the week of November 19, 1979, would honor the third anniversary of the Houston National Women's Conference and demonstrate the administration's commitment to

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<sup>227</sup> Pam Elam, Graduate Program Practicum outline to Gerda Lerner, October 15, 1979, 6, National Women's History Week Papers 1979-80, Institute on Women's History, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College, Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Bronxville, NY.

<sup>228</sup> Agenda Alert, National Women's History Week, November 26, 1979, Series II: Projects, Coalitions, National Women's Agenda Project: Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>229</sup> Shirley Leviton, Letter to President Jimmy Carter, November 14, 1979. Jane Fleming and Betsy Cooley (Wider Opportunities for Women), Letter to President Jimmy Carter, October 24, 1979, and Betty Gonzales (Association for Voluntary Sterilization), letter to President Jimmy Carter, December 5, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: General Correspondence, 1979-80, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.



the National Plan of Action adopted in 1977, in support of women's rights. Likewise, Karen Mulhauser (Executive Director of the National Abortion Rights Action League) cited Carter's stated commitment to "equal rights and women's full participation in American society." Mulhauser noted that Carter's presidential campaign promise of the advancement of women's rights remained unfulfilled, admonished, "This is an opportunity to further the cause of women's rights in a 'non-political' fashion. Please seize it!"<sup>230</sup>

Some leaders of women's organizations took a more practical persuasive approach. Dina Pinnock, of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, stated, "You would provide an awaited opportunity for the general public to honor and explore women's history." Pinnock and Nancy Prichard (Executive Director of Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation) noted that requiring the resolution to go through Congress would take several months and use substantial monetary and energy resources. Carter's proclamation would allow interested parties to prepare for extensive nationwide celebrations.<sup>231</sup> Mildred Kiefer Wurf (Girls Clubs of America), concurred, citing the proclamation as a "catalyst" to giving women's history "proper and fitting recognition." Perhaps hoping for spousal pressure, Wurf also copied her letter to Rosalynn Carter, who held the position of Honorary Chair in the Girls Clubs.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Karen Mulhauser, Letter to President Jimmy Carter, December 6, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: General Correspondence, 1979-80, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>231</sup> Dina Pinnock, undated letter to President Jimmy Carter and Nancy Pritchard, Letter to President Jimmy Carter, December 11, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: General Correspondence, 1979-80, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>232</sup> Mildred Kiefer Wurf, Letter to President Jimmy Carter, December 6, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: General Correspondence, 1979-80, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

Historians also joined the letter writing campaign. John Hope Franklin, Professor of History at The University of Chicago and President of the American Historical Association, assured Carter that a proclamation would “give heart to those women and men who seek the equality of women in every way.”<sup>233</sup> Gerda Lerner, Carl Degler (Organization of American Historians president), and William Appleman Williams (incoming OAH president) also sent similar endorsements to Carter. Lerner noted in her letter that, “as a professional historian, I believe such an event would significantly aid in the promotion of history in the schools and the media at a time when historical studies have suffered a decline in popularity.” Lerner acknowledged that a national celebration of Women’s History Week would encourage local and community celebrations, involving schools, libraries, churches, and women’s organizations. Young women would find “heroines and role models in the past and to raise their goals for citizenship participation.”<sup>234</sup> The December 1979 *Ms. Magazine* feature on the Institute authored by Lerner and Omolade highlighting the Women’s History Week proposal resulted in over 500 requests for the Institute’s book list.

Despite the extensive interest and support, the Sarah Lawrence students quickly recognized that obtaining the Presidential Proclamation was not as simple as asking. An undated, unsigned note extensively highlighted with underlines and exclamations illustrates growing frustration, stating, “If Carter hasn’t declared National Women’s History Week by

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<sup>233</sup> John Hope Franklin, Letter to President Jimmy Carter, December 17, 1979, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: General Correspondence, 1979-80, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>234</sup> Gerda Lerner, letter to President Jimmy Carter, November 27, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College: National Women’s History Week Papers - Correspondence, 1979-1984, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

January, hold a press conference (get Steinem, Mikulski, Hartman, etc.) and declare it ourselves.”<sup>235</sup> Correspondence from Carter’s personal administration officials underscored the frustrating procedural structure. Throughout 1979 and early 1980, Elam and Pascoe corresponded regularly with members of Carter’s administration: Sarah Weddington, Libby Cator, and Lynda Johnson Robb. While Weddington and Cator personally supported the establishment of Women’s History Week, both acknowledged Carter’s policy of not interfering in the process of Congressional Joint Resolutions, a necessary procedural step for the formal declaration. In November 1979, Dan Chew, Staff Assistant to Carter, responded to repeated requests from Institute participants with a form letter acknowledging the standard criteria for formal commemorative decrees: “Proclamations are issued either in response to a joint Congressional resolution or when there is a well-established tradition, such as Thanksgiving Day.”<sup>236</sup>

Feminists had grown increasingly frustrated with Carter’s reluctance to institute long-lasting steps for equality for women after the November 1977 Houston Conference for Women. While Carter had established the National Advisory Committee for Women (NACW) and an Interdepartmental Taskforce on Women to follow up on the plans developed by the International Women’s Year Committee, these programs and their administrators were perceived as loyal to the president rather than to the interests of women. The programs justified Carter’s

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<sup>235</sup> Pam Elam, Graduate Program Practicum outline to Gerda Lerner, October 15, 1979, 4, National Women’s History Week Papers 1979-80, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. It is unclear which “Hartman” Elam is referencing. I suspect it is someone associated with either the Carter administration or another governmental department.

<sup>236</sup> Dan Chew, staff assistant to President Jimmy Carter, Letter to Betty Brinson (Southern Women’s Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, November 21, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College National Women’s History Papers: Correspondence, 1979-84, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

interests and views, but had little funding or staffing. In addition, and more concerning, these programs would cease to exist when Carter left office. Even close-Carter advisor Weddington was “more cautious than enthusiastic.”<sup>237</sup> As Ruth Abram (WAA) commented, “Little has changed since Houston.”<sup>238</sup>

When contacted for sponsorship of the legislation, Senator Edward Kennedy also cited procedural limitations, writing Elam that while supportive of “women’s issues,” in his role as Chair of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, it was his policy not to introduce commemorative resolutions.<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, while the proposal had significant bipartisan support within the House and the Senate, the process of enlisting bill co-sponsors for the resolution required an enormous output of time, energy, and money. Kennedy suggested consideration of the resolution after the new Congress convened in January 1980.

Lynda Johnson Robb, now-Chair of Carter’s National Advisory Committee for Women and in charge of promoting political, economic, and cultural equality, recommended taking a different approach, encouraging establishment of Women’s History Week events through the local and state level.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Cynthia Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s,” ed. Stephanie Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 38. Harrison noted that in January 1979, tensions boiled over. Twenty-three of the 40 NACW committee members resigned from their appointed positions in protest over Carter’s inaction to institute significant changes.

<sup>238</sup> Cynthia Harrison, “Creating a National Feminist Agenda,” 38.

<sup>239</sup> Edward Kennedy, letter to Pam Elam, dated November 17, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College National Women’s History Papers: Correspondence, 1979-84.

<sup>240</sup> Lynda Johnson Robb, Letter to Pam Elam and Peggy Pascoe, December 4, 1979, Sarah Lawrence College National Women’s History Papers: Correspondence, 1979-84, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. Robb replaced Bella Abzug as chair of NACW, after Abzug and twenty-two of her resigned.

In response to the political run-around, Elam and WAA's Omolade drafted a letter in January 1980 to all of the Institute participants, with an update on the stalled legislation. Organizations were encouraged to begin a private campaign to bring awareness to the establishment of a celebration of women's history. Suggested promotions favored a diverse array of action, in order to highlight the broad scope of women's history. Libraries could promote book discussions and feature women's history displays. Organizations should ask churches to celebrate with programs about churchwomen and women's participation in religion. Organizations could host films with follow up discussions, or develop community programs about women's contributions and organizations. Local and state legislative representatives, government agencies, and Boards of Education became prime targets to gain support for declaring March 2-8, 1980 as Women's History Week.<sup>241</sup>

Due to the efforts of Institute participants throughout the fall and winter of 1979, fourteen states and dozens of cities declared Women's History Week, during March 2-8, 1980. In his state proclamation, Kentucky Governor John Brown, Jr., announced, "It is fitting and proper that a period of time be set aside to celebrate the contributions of women in history, to promote public awareness of their contributions, and to encourage further study of this subject."<sup>242</sup> Colorado Governor Richard Lamm noted, "It is important that all Americans

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<sup>241</sup> Pam Elam and Barbara Omolade, Letter to all Institute participants, January 17, 1980, Sarah Lawrence College National Women's History Papers: Correspondence, 1979-84, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>242</sup> John Y. Brown, Proclamation by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, WAA Records: Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: General Correspondence, 1979-80, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

increase their knowledge of the roles women have played in the making of this Nation's history and in the development of our society and culture."<sup>243</sup>

Women's organizations hosted dozens of events throughout the country. Likewise, Elam and Pascoe developed several commemorations for the Sarah Lawrence community and in nearby New York City. Notably, in a February 1980 meeting with women's organization leaders, Carter released an acknowledgment of the value of celebrating Women's History Week, pairing the celebration with passage of the Equal Rights Amendment: "Understanding the true history of our country will help us to comprehend the need for full equality under the law for all our people. This goal can be achieved by ratifying the 27th Amendment to the United States Constitution: 'Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.'"<sup>244</sup> While not a legislative victory, the coalition of Institute participants had their presidential tribute commemorating the significance of women's history.

### The Reagan Administration Changes Everything

Pam Elam and other Sarah Lawrence College students continued to work with Representative Barbara Mikulski's office throughout 1980, to ensure that a formal declaration of Women's History Week happened in 1981. Failing to rally enough support during the lame-duck session of Congress, Mikulski re-introduced the bill in February 1981. Easily confirming

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<sup>243</sup> Richard Lamm, Declaration from the Governor of Colorado for Women's History Week, March 2-8, 1980, Sarah Lawrence College National Women's History Papers: Correspondence, 1979-84, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

<sup>244</sup> Copy of Jimmy Carter Proclamation of Women's History Week, February 28, 1980, Series II: Projects, Coalitions, National Women's Agenda Project: Agenda, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

enough co-sponsors, Senator Orrin Hatch introduced a companion bill in the Senate. Congress first enacted National Women's History Week in 1981, in response to a joint resolution (502) introduced by Representative Barbara Mikulski. President Ronald Reagan designated the week of March 7, 1982, as the first National Women's History Week.<sup>245</sup>

Continued legislative support for women's history celebrations was not a given, however. Despite overwhelming Congressional support, California Representative Robert Badham killed the joint resolution for the 1983 celebration in a House of Representative floor voice vote. A disheartened Elam noted that Badham's objection illustrated the "contempt for women and women's issues that some members of Congress have, that we can't even get a seemingly noncontroversial Resolution like this through."<sup>246</sup> Legislative supporters found themselves scrambling at the last minute to re-introduce the resolution by the end of the first week of January 1983, in order to meet deadlines. As a result, only the Senate declared a resolution for the 1983 celebration of Women's History Week.

Federal policy on equity education also shifted with the election of Reagan to the presidency in 1980. President Carter had established the Department of Education in 1979, as part of restructuring the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, largely to meet the needs of the growing influence of education. In contrast, Reagan made his education policy intentions clear in an address to the Joint Session of Congress on a Program for Economic Recovery, in the first month of his presidency, stating, "The taxing power of the government

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<sup>245</sup> Ronald Reagan, Proclamation 4903, February 26, 1982, *United States Government Printing Office*. The week of March 7, 1982 was also set aside as "Save Your Vision Week," per Congressional Resolution Statue 629, dated December 30, 1963 ^7 Stat. 629,36 U.S.C. 169a. Women's History Week first became a month-long event in 1987.

<sup>246</sup> Pam Elam, Sarah Lawrence College National Women's History Papers: Speeches, Women's Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change.”<sup>247</sup> This speech targeted both Title IX and the WEEA, representing the legislation as an unnecessary federal intrusion predicated on an unacceptable support of a “radical feminist” ideology.<sup>248</sup>

Prevention of any legislation reflecting this so-called “radical feminist” agenda became a rallying cry for conservative coalitions. Led by the famously homophobic misogynist Jerry Falwell, Sr., the Moral Majority favored policies that maintained the privileges of white heterosexual middle-class father-led conservative christian households. Joined in political and social activism with evangelical church leaders, as well as conservative policy institutes and media, the resulting Religious Right coalition labeled any opposition to their goals as “radical.”<sup>249</sup> Reagan’s speech encouraged conservative members of Congress and conservative organizations to advance legislation in opposition to equity measures, with expectation of support, if not passage. Reagan established his commitment to Religious Right ideology throughout his presidential campaign, routinely ending speeches with “God bless America,” and repeated references to “old fashioned values.”<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Mary Ann Millsap, “The Reagan Administration Versus Sex Equity in Education,” *Educational Policy* 2 (1988): 377.

<sup>248</sup> Millsap, “The Reagan Administration Versus Sex Equity in Education,” in reference to “radical feminist,” as defined by the conservative right, 378.

<sup>249</sup> A strong case can be made for projection, particularly in Falwell’s case, given extensive documentation of his politically and socially extreme public pronouncements. A personal favorite example: “The idea that religion and politics don’t mix was invented by the Devil to keep christians from running their own country.” Matt Sterans, “Jerry Falwell brought religious conservatives into US politics,” *The Mercury News*, May 16, 2007, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2007/05/16/jerry-falwell-brought-religious-conservatives-into-u-s-politics/>

<sup>250</sup> Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 276.



In earlier administrations, Democrats and Republicans sought common ground on civil rights and equity issues, arguing over techniques of implementation in achieving parity. However, as the always outspoken Bernice Sandler noted, the Reagan administration had “people who don’t share that core value, quite literally. A lot of the people dealing with women’s issues would gladly see women go back to the kitchen.”<sup>251</sup> Sandler, who had used the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to challenge sex discrimination, and relied on bipartisan Congressional support for equity measures, acknowledged the growing influence of extreme conservatism. Now, conservatives asserted that by assimilating women into social institutions like education and sports and by executing social reform through legislation, government enforced liberal democratic principles of equality on society. .

Sandler’s fears proved correct. Within thirty days of taking office, the Reagan administration sought to switch education program funding to a block grant. Conservatives suggested yearly federal budget appropriations go into a general fund, distributed according to legislative priorities. When the Democratic controlled House of Representatives did not approve this funding shift, Republicans responded by neglecting to include any new appropriations for WEEA. While receiving some funding for established programs, WEEA did not receive funds to progress on programs proposed under the Carter administration budget.<sup>252</sup> Continued funding deficits throughout the Reagan administration years made processing of education projects more and more difficult, as the professional staff required for

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<sup>251</sup> Millsap, “The Reagan Administration Versus Sex Equity in Education,” 377.

<sup>252</sup> Subsequent budget cuts in later administrations further minimized the effectiveness of the law. Under the George H.W. Bush administration in 1992, the WEEA budget was only \$500,000. Funding stabilized around \$2 million for several years, under the Clinton administration. During the Obama administration, educational equity programs received just under \$2.5 million, with no new contracts awarded after 2009. The 2018 federal budget requested zero funding for educational equity measures.

implementation of WEEA programs reduced from six in the early 1980s to a staff of two in 1984.<sup>253</sup>

Budgets cuts to education programs were a target of conservative rhetoric throughout the 1980 Presidential campaign. An extensive analysis of federal education policy published by the Heritage Foundation, the influential conservative organization led by Phyllis Schlafly, claimed that rather than being committed to education equity, WEEA acted solely as a resource for feminist policies. As such, “Its programs require immediate scrutiny and its budget should be drastically cut.”<sup>254</sup>

The Reagan administration wasted no time. In early spring 1981, the administration bypassed Department of Education committees and sent a thousand page bill to the Budget committee. Echoing the Heritage Foundation report, the bill proposed consolidation of over forty small grant education programs into a single block grant. WEEA and Title IX were to be

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<sup>253</sup> All education policies became targets of the conservative Reagan administration. Policy challenges to civil rights initiatives and Title IX were almost immediate. After its passage in 1974, college and university officials, the public, and Congress immediately sought amendments to Title IX, becoming more conscious of its implications. Originally, Title IX instituted equitable education opportunities for women and girls by eliminating school and college admission policies that prohibited or limited access to women. Pregnant students had protections from expulsion. Athletic programs for women and girls expanded participation in sports, increasing involvement from 7% to 335% within five years. Instructed to test employment capabilities the same way for girls and boys, school counselors recognized an immediate interest in gender non-traditional occupations. Schools had one to seven years to come into compliance of Title IX, dependent upon the changes needed to become compliant. This allowed time for restructuring of the Office of Civil Right (OCR) and resolution of any policy challenges. This time lapse also affected implementation of Title IX policies. OCR, (led by Clarence Thomas in 1981-2), prosecuted Title IX violation claims. The 1984 Supreme Court case *Grove City College vs. Bell* determined that Title IX coverage only applied to programs that received federal funding, again limiting the scope of Title IX. Subsequently, OCR would investigate complaints and non-compliance only in those programs that received specifically earmarked federal funds. This meant that if the violation occurred in a campus office building built or renovated without using Federal funds, the claim could be denied. Restructuring of OCR in 1988 as a result of the *Grove City* decision made implementation of Title IX guidelines more difficult.

<sup>254</sup> Millsap, “The Reagan Administration Versus Sex Equity in Education,” 383. Originally cited as Charles L. Heatherly, ed., “Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration, (Washington D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1981), 179-180.

included in this block grant. While the Senate passed the legislation, the measure was narrowly defeated in the House. However, a 25% reduction in funding occurred.<sup>255</sup>

Deflected but not deterred, the Reagan administration's energy shifted to replacing women's rights initiatives with tax credits, flextime for federal workers, and IRS garnishment of wages to collect delinquent child support payments. This reframed programs intended to promote equality as financial policy adjustments. Policy position papers authored by William Barr extensively detail the Reagan administration's marketing strategy of a "Solid Record of Achievement" from 1981-83. Barr noted women's need for a "sound economy" and "legal equity" as primary concerns. This obscured women's stated desire for economic stability policies and the autonomy to make their own life choices freely. Barr's preferred solution of reworked tax policies became the Reagan rally cry, and categorically denied any "gender gap" as "not related to this administration's record on so-called 'women's issues.'" Minimizing women's apprehensions about policy changes as frustrations over Reagan's opposition to the ERA, Barr easily dismissed the fears of "certain groups of single, economically vulnerable women worried about the administration's overall economic and foreign policies," as unworthy of consideration.<sup>256</sup> This dismissal of women's interests felt all too familiar to feminist coalitions. While Carter had asserted passage of the ERA (and celebration of Women's History Week) as essential to full equality for all under federal law, the Reagan administration's compliance with Religious Right conservative politics left no illusions about policy intents.

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<sup>255</sup> The proposed 1982 yearly budget contained no funding for WEEA.

<sup>256</sup> William Barr, Executive Summary of Reagan Administration Achievements on Matters of Concern to Women, Folder: William Barr March 3-April 6, 1983, Box 16, Ronald Reagan Library.

Barr's report summarized the three issues the administration considered to be of greatest concern to the Congress members requesting meetings with Reagan: Equal Rights legislation, wage disparity policies, and the Economic Equity Act. Barr encouraged Reagan to tread carefully in discussing ERA, as current language of the legislation would "give a blank check" to the judiciary, who could interpret the law at will. Barr also noted the issue of "fairness" being raised by conservative Congress members and women's organizations in regards to ERA. Citing Schlafly, Barr argued that since the ERA had failed ratification twice, before any additional reconsiderations American citizens should be allowed to deliberate constitutional amendments requiring a balanced federal budget, allowing school prayer, and right-to-life protections.<sup>257</sup> Barr also warned that less conservative Congress members might ask Reagan to endorse a bill that would empower federal judges to complete many of the things the ERA intended to do. Rewording the bill would give judges the ability to strike all gender-based classifications from federal law. In addition, women could be drafted and expected to serve in combat units, gays could be granted marriage and other domestic rights, sanctions could be placed on churches that denied equal rights, and single-sex education facilities receiving federal funds would be threatened. From a Republican ideological

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<sup>257</sup> In November 1983, ERA failed reintroduction as potential legislation by six votes in a floor vote in the House of Representatives. Since then, the legislation has been introduced to every session of Congress. In 2013, language was added to the proposed amendment, stating: Section 1: Women shall have equal rights in the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Section 2: Congress and the several States shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article. Section 3: This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification. Section 1 would finally include women in the Constitution, while Section 2 would guarantee legal enforcement of sex and gender discrimination prohibitions (<https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/faq>).

standpoint, Barr acknowledged, “This bill is more pernicious than ERA because it bypasses that state ratification process.”<sup>258</sup>

Barr suggested that the accusation of a Reagan administration “gender gap” amounted to a disagreement over semantics, rather than policy. Women negatively perceived Reagan as “too tough” and “too uncaring,” while men responded to his “toughness” and understood that “in hard times, certain sacrifices are necessary even if it hurts.” Deeming defense program spending necessary and social service cuts as inevitable belied the economic impact on women and children, a growing number whom lived in single-parent families headed by women. Barr proposed three solutions to closing the gender gap. First, create economic recovery through tax restructuring. Second, stay out of war while continuing to build defense infrastructure. Lastly, widely share positive messaging by focusing on the appointments of women to the administration as evidence of supporting women. Listening to and validating women’s concerns were not included as possible administrative solutions.<sup>259</sup>

However, in August 1982, Senators Dave Durenberger, Bob Packwood, John Heinz, Bill Cohen, and Mark Hatfield expressed growing apprehension over public perceptions that Republicans lacked investment in the needs of women. The senators suggested filling the open position of Public Liaison in the President’s Office with a moderate Republican, in order to

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<sup>258</sup> William Barr, Executive Summary of Reagan Administration Achievements on Matters of Concern to Women, Folder: William Barr March 3-April 6, 1983, Box 16, Ronald Reagan Library, 2.

<sup>259</sup> William Barr, Executive Summary of Reagan Administration Achievements on Matters of Concern to Women, Folder: William Barr March 3-April 6, 1983, Box 16, Ronald Reagan Library, 8.

facilitate bipartisan cooperation with women's organization.<sup>260</sup> Within three days, the White House responded by forming a Coordinating Council on Women, staffed by senior White House officials. In addition, Dee Ann Jepsen became Public Liaison; Mary Elizabeth Quint as Deputy Director of the newly established *50 States Project*, and Catherine May Bedell became White House Special Consultant. These positions singularly focused on "women's issues."<sup>261</sup>

The 1982 mid-term election shifted Republicans growing concern about the gender gap to alarm. Democratic victories overwhelmingly credited the support of women. Women had voted in equal numbers to men for the first time in 1980, largely for more liberal or Democratic candidates. Influenced by Democratic support for social issues, and rallied by voter registration campaigns led by women's organizations, a "distinctive issue-oriented voting bloc" developed around a platform of equality.<sup>262</sup> In addition, early polling for the 1984 election showed that women favored potential presidential contenders over Reagan. A *New York Times* report portrayed the gender gap as politically and culturally influential as the Civil Rights movement had been in the 1960s.<sup>263</sup> In contrast, the Reagan administration and its "New Right" supporters routinely manipulated the equal opportunity rhetoric of the feminist movement to fulfill decidedly patriarchal policies. Reagan's "free market" economic policies adopted any

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<sup>260</sup> Dave Durenberger, Bob Packwood, John Heinz, Bill Cohen, and Mark Hatfield, Letter to James Baker, White House Chief of Staff, August 24, 1982, Folder: August 1982 Outgoing Correspondence, James Baker Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>261</sup> Elizabeth Dole, Letter to Bob Packwood, September 30, 1982, Folder: August 1982 Outgoing Correspondence, James Baker Files, Ronald Reagan Library. Jepsen's qualifications stemmed from her founding of a nonprofit organization to help dissidents leave communist countries. Jepsen also managed her husband's senate office. Quint had been the international president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Bedell had been a six term Congressional representative and chair of the US International Trade Commission.

<sup>262</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free Market Feminism," *Journal of Policy History* 24, no 1 (2012): 116.

<sup>263</sup> Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy," 115.

appointment of women to administrative positions as examples of success on a “level playing field,” and proof of equal opportunity.<sup>264</sup>

The success of a few women continued to universalize the success of all. In response letters to constituents, Reagan’s Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver routinely cited recent tax code adjustments as evidence of widespread gains for women: removal of the “marriage tax” penalty and the “widow’s tax” on property, as well as childcare credits and larger IRA tax shelters. Responding to questions on the lack of support for passage of the ERA, Deaver cited Reagan’s belief that existing constitutional and legal guarantees protected women from discrimination; the ERA was therefore unnecessary.<sup>265</sup> Instead, the administration would work with Congress to “correct” 140 federal statutes that contained gender bias. As evidence of valuing women’s roles in government, Deaver repeatedly referenced Sandra Day O’Connor’s appointment to the Supreme Court, as well as the three women named to Cabinet positions: Margaret Heckler (Health & Human Services), Elizabeth Dole (Transportation), and Jeane Kirkpatrick (Ambassador to the United Nations).<sup>266</sup>

In replying to another citizen, Deaver acknowledged concern over reorganization of the Civil Rights Commission. Reagan had recently used an executive order to fire the three remaining Democratic commissioners: Mary Frances Berry, a professor of history and law at Howard University; Blandina Cardenas Ramirez, an educator in San Antonio, and Rabbi Murray

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<sup>264</sup> Chappell, “Reagan’s ‘Gender Gap’ Strategy,” 119.

<sup>265</sup> Michael K. Deaver, Letter to Cynthia Wallace Berne, January 26, 1984, Folder: January 1984 Outgoing, Box: 16, Michael Deaver Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>266</sup> Over half of the \$44 billion cut from Reagan’s 1982 budget focused on reducing funding for income security (Social Security and unemployment) and education, employment training, and social service programs, a marked shift from prior administrations. Sheldon Danzinger and Robert Haveman, “The Reagan Budget: A Sharp Break with the Past,” *Challenge* 24 (May-June, 1981): 6.

Saltzman of Baltimore, who had criticized recent policy changes affecting women, Blacks, and Hispanics. Deaver once again cited tax credits and women holding administrative positions as evidence of Reagan's good will towards women and people of color, noting, "This administration actively enforces laws guaranteeing equal rights in education and employment."<sup>267</sup> Absent from Deaver's analysis: most policies focused on women's economics benefited middle/upperly-mobile whites only.

In February 1983, six of the nine female Republican House representatives wrote to Reagan requesting support for the ERA and the newly proposed Women's Economic Equality Act, intended to further develop tax credits and support work experience programs. The Congress members noted Reagan's pledge to improve women's economic stability and protection of civil rights as stated in his recent State of the Union address. Aware of administration proposals to phase out WEEA by 1984, the Congress members noted that WEEA remained the only federal program that specifically addressed educational equity for women and therefore should be "fully funded and vigorously administered."<sup>268</sup> The Reagan administration responded by setting a meeting with the Congress members for early March, noting in an internal memo that "because we had to provide material in such a short time frame, it is not as tactfully worded as it might be and would benefit from a political spin."<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Michael K. Deaver, Letter to Jennifer Brown, January 26, 1984, Folder: January 1984 Outgoing, Box: 16, Michael Deaver Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>268</sup> Claudine Schneider, Olympia Snowe, Marge Roukema, Nancy Johnson, Lynn Martin, and Bobbi Fielder, Letter to Ronald Reagan, February 3, 1983, ID #123005, WHORM: Correspondence, Ronald Reagan Library. Representative Barbara Vucanovich did not sign the letter as she did not support the ERA. Representative Virginia Smith had not decided on support for either ERA or the Economic Equity Act. Representative Marjorie Holt opposed both pieces of legislation.

<sup>269</sup> Barbara Selfridge, Memo to Ken Clarkson, Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, March 4, 1983, ID #123005, WHORM: Office of Policy Development, Ronald Reagan Library.



Notably, the restructuring of staff and funding for WEEA received markedly little political spin, despite outrage from education activists and feminist coalitions concerned with a growing cultural backlash towards women's equality. Instead of sustaining the already viable bipartisan supported program, the Reagan administration followed recommendations favored by the Heritage Foundation to dismantle WEEA, on the grounds that Government interference in the marketplace is the greatest barrier to the success and advancement of women."<sup>270</sup> As a fait accompli, Reagan appointed 17 new members to the NACWEP board in 1982. The first order of business at the swearing in ceremony dismissed highly qualified executive director Joy Simonson. Rosemary Thomson became director the next day. The Illinois director of the Eagle Forum, Thomson's only connection to education was as an infrequent substitute teacher and her Congressional testimony calling for the defunding of WEEA in 1981. New council members included five educators, six businesswomen, three homemakers/activists, a lawyer, a legislator, and a recent college graduate: all chosen by White House Advisor Wendy Borchardt under the advisement of the Heritage Foundation.<sup>271</sup>

Rather than continuing as an independent source of policymakers, the council became another mouthpiece for administration policies. The council also endorsed Reagan's suggestion to develop "in service" training for educators.<sup>272</sup> While the NACWEP council initially asked for

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<sup>270</sup> Emily Rock, Memo to Roger Porter, re "Agenda '83: The White House and Women," December 6, 1982, chapter preview authored by Margaret Bonilla, Heritage Foundation, distributed to the White House Coordinating Council on Women and its Working Group, Office of Policy Development, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>271</sup> Subsequent outrage led to Borchardt's firing by Elizabeth Dole, then Assistant for Public Liaison to Reagan. Under pressure due to her policy suggestions, Thomson resigned in 1984. Joy Simonson, "The Rise and Decline of the Advisory Council on Women's Educational Equity," *National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity*, [www.napequity.org](http://www.napequity.org), 5.

<sup>272</sup> US Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, "Annual Report, 1982," March 31, 1983, [www.napequity.org](http://www.napequity.org).

\$15.4 million to fund WEEA programs in 1983, this amount quickly reduced to zero in response to the administration's recommendation. Reagan wished to focus on building STEM programming, funded largely by businesses.

Concerned about the threat to WEEA, Senator Walter Mondale wrote to Reagan in September 1983, stating, "I fought hard for the creation of the Women's Educational Equity Act, and will not stand idly by as your administration methodically dismantles it." Mondale noted his pride in working with Senator Patsy Mink in preparing the 1974 legislation and his anger at the Reagan administration's repeated attempts to "undermine and virtually abolish" WEEA, observing, "It has twice tried to eliminate WEEA's funding. And when efforts to bankrupt the program crumbled under Congressional scrutiny and public outcry, your administration set out to dismantle WEEA's staff."<sup>273</sup> Calling the quick September 16 deadline for comment an act of "sabotage," Mondale pointedly called the restructuring of WEEA an assault on equity and opportunity.

One of the reasons for the administration's repeated insistence on defunding and restructuring WEEA is revealed in the official Department of Education response to Mondale. Secretary Terrence Bell acknowledged that at the time of WEEA's creation in 1974, women were only 45 percent of college and university enrollment. By 1980, women made up more than half of all students, and actively sought degrees in engineering, business, and law. Bell cited this as evidence that "sex-role stereotyping has diminished as a factor in the choice of

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<sup>273</sup> Walter Mondale, Letter to Ronald Reagan, September 15, 1983. ID #14717255, WHORM: Correspondence, Ronald Reagan Library.

career or continuing education.”<sup>274</sup> Diminished possibly, but not disappeared or sustained equitably. Bell implied that the addition of women to career fields largely exclusive to males required adjustment: too many women would threaten the stability of the educational institutions and traditional employment opportunities for men. Bell also cited quality of education as an administrative concern, promoting the conviction that “the quality of education received by all students has declined precipitously.” While not offering specific data to verify this claim, and refusing to recognize WEEA as a solution to this perceived problem, Bell forwarded the Republican party-line recommendation of merit pay for teachers as the only viable equity measure, for teachers. Bell argued that merit pay would be “an equity measure for the women who entered the (teaching) profession when other careers were closed to them.”

Bell’s response to Mondale echoed the oft-stated Republican values of “a return to tradition,” that favored parental and local control of education: a deliberate misinterpretation of educational equity. Instead, the conservative view favored education as utilitarian, a necessary step leading to employment opportunity. This standpoint repeated the hierarchal model of success: a meritocracy demonstrated and achieved through adherence to traditional values.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Terrence Bell, Letter to Walter Mondale, September 29, 1983, ID #147172, WHORM: Correspondence, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>275</sup> Mondale’s concerns may have been dismissed, if not for the approaching 1984 election. Washington rumors suggested that Mondale considered adding a woman as his presidential running mate. In an effort to deflect attention from Mondale, Hearst Newspaper editor Joseph Kingsbury-Smith encouraged White House Counsel Edwin Meese to suggest that Reagan give a high ranking Cabinet position to a woman, stating, “such an announcement by the President might swing a lot of disappointed women to his side,” if Mondale did not follow through on his plans. In response, Elizabeth Dole received a promotion from the White House Office of Public Liaison to Secretary of Transportation. (Joseph Kingsbury-Smith, Letter to Edwin Meese III, White House Council,

## A Backlash Stalls Progress

The education policies of the Reagan administration, along with other policies affecting women, emphasized a growing anti-feminism backlash in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminism favored “sisterhood” as its norm, and focused on building communities of women (and some men) sustained by laws favoring equality and equity. However, internalized privilege and oppression, strengthened by politics, economics, and social values perpetually threatened to dismantle a communal investment in equality.

At the Institute, participants discussed the growing backlash against the women’s movement through its connection to women’s history. Abram shared the verbal abuse she experienced while speaking on sexism in school curricula to a group of school superintendents. She was jeered, had things thrown at her, and then followed to her hotel room and physically threatened. Abram’s reminded participants that women speakers and lecturers in the 19th century regularly experienced the same treatment. She was “not alone.”<sup>276</sup>

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July 9, 1984, ID #240894, Folder: July 1984 Outgoing Correspondence, Edwin Meese III Files, Ronald Reagan Library.) The Reagan administration often used Elizabeth Dole as the representative of women’s success. Dole herself credited “new and welcome” market opportunities rather than the efforts of feminists in gaining her Cabinet position. Acting as administrative spokesperson, Dole argued, “The real gender gap we confront is not political, but financial and legal. It is the short fall between society’s promise of sexual equity and the often frustrating facts of American life.” Dole’s advocacy of women’s equality paired with anti-abortion beliefs presented a conflict for feminists and conservatives alike. Both camps struggled to reconcile her prominent political position with her use of traditional solutions to policy. (Chappell, “Reagan’s Gender Gap,” 121.)

<sup>276</sup> Church Women’s United, Post-Institute feedback, Projects: Education: Institute on Women’s History, 1979: Administration: Evaluations, 1979, part 2 of 4, 2, Women’s Action Alliance Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

As journalist Susan Faludi noted in her best-selling book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, “It must be all the equality that’s causing all that pain.”<sup>277</sup> Popular culture built a false narrative of the gains, rights, and opportunities available to women, often portraying these as instituted at the expense of men. As evidence, Faludi listed multiple magazines that proclaimed the women’s movement as the source of every struggle, throughout the late 1980s. *Newsweek* declared feminism as “the great experiment that failed. *Harper’s Bazaar* claimed, “The women’s movement lost us ground instead of gaining it.” *Time* lamented, “We believed the rhetoric.”<sup>278</sup> The public accepted at face value the gendered bias of the all-male, all white Board of Directors that ruled the media conglomerates that published these opinions.<sup>279</sup> These messages echoed the rhetoric of the Religious Right coalition.

As the backlash against gender equality grew, women became the perceived source of every social disorder. For example, Faludi cited a US Attorney General Commission on Pornography report that connected escalating college attendance and employment by women to the increasing rates of sexual assault, a consequence of having more opportunity to be raped.<sup>280</sup> Faludi argued that the widely touted “man shortage,” “infertility epidemic,” “female

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<sup>277</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), x.

<sup>278</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, x.

<sup>279</sup> Reagan’s appointed Federal Communication Commissioner Mark Fowler opposed the Fairness Doctrine that determined television networks as “public trustees” with a responsibility to portray objective content to consumers. In 1987, Fowler announced that due to expansion of technology that supported infinite airtime, the FCC would no longer enforce the Fairness Doctrine. Consequently, television increasingly ignored objectivity standards. Talk shows and reality television replaced family-centered programming. Media companies merged at a rapid pace, blending print media sources with audio and visual mediums. The mergers led to monopolies that favored information biases and restricted access to alternative content. The Telecommunication Act of 1996 officially deregulated the prior New Deal control of media, opening up communication markets to competition.

<sup>280</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, xii.

burnout,” and “toxic day care” represented manufactured crises intended to distract and deflect progress towards equality.<sup>281</sup> Fiction, television, and films echo print media overwhelmingly portrayed educated, professional single women as undesirable, unhappy, and/or mentally unbalanced. To meet a professed need, mass-market publishing greatly expanded the audience of self-help books in the mid-1980s. Notably, when national surveys asked women their opinion of the women’s movement, more than 75 percent favored the improvements gained through feminism.<sup>282</sup>

In describing the backlash against feminism as tantamount to a battle “between women and the male culture they inhabit, Faludi underscores the *us vs. them* machinations of patriarchy, in which the continual undercurrent of hierarchal privilege “appears to not be political” but rather a factual reality.<sup>283</sup> Faludi offered this description of how patriarchy works to create and sustain a backlash:

“A backlash against women’s rights succeeds to the degree that it appears *not* to be political, that it appears not to be a struggle at all. It is most powerful when it goes private, when it lodges inside a woman’s mind and turns her vision inward, until she imagines the pressure is all in her head, until she begins to enforce the backlash, too - on herself.”<sup>284</sup>

The backlash worked on the same hierarchal pathways of privilege as patriarchy. Criticism relied on a binary understanding and commitment to right/wrong, best/worst, all/nothing that

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<sup>281</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, xv. On a personal note, these examples remind me of Hillary Clinton’s 1992 response to the *Family Circle* magazine Cookie Baking contest: “I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life.” At the time, I found her statement funny. My mother was horrified, however (and refused to vote for Clinton in 2016).

<sup>282</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, xv.

<sup>283</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, xxi.

<sup>284</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, xxii.

always underscored white, christian, educated, abled, economically advantaged men as the static foundation of society. Women represented the dependent control variable of the social experiment, continually in reaction to the established norms. Any attempt to change the baseline of patriarchy resulted in reinforcement of patriarchy: a system that repels change regardless of causality. While cause and effect may shift perspective, the progress (cause) still adheres to the patriarchal hierarchy (effect). Regardless of either gender's actions and/or intents, the lens of men maintained women's identity as subservient to men. Like magnets, women and men attracted and repelled, becoming stronger and weaker depending on interactions. Reinforced throughout millennia by historical narratives centered on the experiences and achievements of men, patriarchy became the lodestone: always the focus of attention and force of attraction.

Reagan's Proclamation of Women's History Week in 1982 began with this assertion: "American women of every race, creed and ethnic background helped found and build our Nation in countless recorded and unrecorded ways." The Proclamation continued, referencing women's roles as pioneers, teachers, mothers, homemakers, soldiers, nurses and laborers, noting, "their diverse service is among America's most precious gifts." The Proclamation ends with this request: "Recognizing that the many contributions of American women have at times been overlooked in the annals of American history, I encourage all citizens to observe this important week by participating in appropriate ceremonies and activities planned by

individuals, governmental agencies, and private institutions and associations throughout the country.”<sup>285</sup>

On the surface, this Proclamation (and the 1983-1988 editions) portrays an administration appreciative of women’s achievements and encouraging of women’s success. However, throughout his tenure in the presidency, Reagan battled a reputation as dismissive of women’s equality, in part due to his coalition with conservative groups. The Religious Right, working with Heritage Foundation advisors, wrote a “Family Protection Act” in 1980, intended as the first legislative initiative for the Reagan administration. Publicly marketed as a measure to help households through tax code changes, the Act in fact eliminated almost all of the legal gains made by the women’s movement. The Act required marriage and motherhood be taught as “proper careers” for girls. Forbidden: any sports or school-related activities between girls and boys. Any school district using textbooks portraying girls and women in non-traditional roles risked denial of federal funding. Federal funding also denied subsidies to defend battered wives from their husbands, or for divorce or abortion counseling.<sup>286</sup> Defining women solely through their roles as wives and mothers became the foundation of the Religious Right, highlighted through deliberate comparisons to feminists. Edmund Haislmaier, a Heritage

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<sup>285</sup> Ronald Reagan, Proclamation 4903, Women’s History Week, 1982, Reagan Presidential Library Archive, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/proclamation-4903-womens-history-week-1982>. Subsequent Proclamations in 1983-88 repeat much of the language of this first statement, though 1982 is the only one to make a direct reference to women’s roles in history.

<sup>286</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash*, 241-245. Note: Faludi noted that the initial draft of the Family Protection Act was written by Connie Marshner, who began her political activism in 1971 by writing an attack for the Conservative Young Americans for Freedom on a child care bill sponsored by Walter Mondale. Marriage and motherhood did not hinder Marshner from taking a job as a researcher for the Heritage Foundation in 1973, where she became a contemporary of Phyllis Schlafly.



Foundation research fellow in the late 1970s, offered this insight on the effectiveness of

Religious Right campaigns to discredit the work of feminists:

“In retrospect, I’d have to say they blamed the feminists for an awful lot more than they actually deserved. The women’s movement didn’t really cause the high divorce rate, which had already started before women’s liberation started up. The feminists certainly didn’t have anything to do with disastrous economic policies. But the feminists became this very identifiable target. Ellie Smeal (former President of NOW) was a recognizable target; hyperinflation and tax bracketing were not.”<sup>287</sup>

The 1981 Heritage Foundation’s “Mandate for Leadership” offered a master plan for the Reagan administration, setting forth policy priorities and warning of “increasing political leverage of feminist interests,” if the mandate was not implemented.<sup>288</sup> Like the Family Protection Act, the mandate idealized women’s roles as wives and mothers. However, the mandate offered much more specific steps to abolishing perceived feminist threats. The federal program that topped the list for elimination was WEEA. The Heritage Foundation viewed WEEA as an “important resource for the practices of feminist policies and politics.”<sup>289</sup> WEEA’s director Leslie Wolfe was one of few high-ranking government officials that conservatives could identify directly as a feminist, making her an effective target. Internal government memos and media spread false information about Wolfe’s professional behavior. Consequently, the label of “radical” applied to both Wolfe and WEEA.

Advisors to the administration viewed Wolfe as a career bureaucrat. Perfectly positioned “to aid her radical feminist allies with taxpayer money,” she became a target of

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<sup>287</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, 235.

<sup>288</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, 234.

<sup>289</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, 239.

distain and distrust.<sup>290</sup> The Heritage Foundation described WEEA policies as “more in keeping with extreme feminist ideology than concern for the quality of education.”<sup>291</sup> An unsigned editorial in the *Conservative Digest* demanded Wolfe’s “swift dethronement.”

Shortly after this media campaign to discredit Wolfe began, the Reagan administration announced a review of WEEA policies, with Wolfe reassigned to a task force on government fraud, waste, and abuse. Conservative field reviewers unfamiliar with gender equity and civil rights legislation, now handled WEEA program appraisals. A reviewer of one project modeled on Title IX compliance specifications questioned her co-moderator, “What is Title IX?” A professor from Bob Jones University, which only admitted white students and thereby excluded from federal funding under Title IX, ranked the proposals that attended to the educational challenges of women of color.

Finding no discrepancies in program policies and under pressure from legislators and women’s groups, Wolfe’s reinstatement to director occurred three months after the review process completed. However, in an attempt to convince the public that the WEEA represented “the feminist network feeding at the Federal trough,” the program underwent additional restructuring. Downgraded from its position as the premier program in the Department of Education, WEEA staff became “at will” employees, susceptible to layoffs or dismissal.<sup>292</sup> In this process, WEEA became an expendable commodity.

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<sup>290</sup> Millsap, “The Reagan Administration Versus Sex Equity in Education,” 384. Originally cited in *Conservative Digest* 8 (April 1982), 26.

<sup>291</sup> News release, “Director of Education Department Women’s Program is Reassigned Amid Controversy,” *Education Week*, May 5, 1982.

<sup>292</sup> Millsap, “The Reagan Administration Versus Sex Equity in Education,” citing *Washington Post* (Sept 6, 1983), 386.

## Conclusion

As the National Federation of Republican Women noted in a March 1983 letter to Reagan, “We want to share with you our belief and concern that the perception women across the country have of your administration is more important than the record. The perception is that this administration falls somewhere between being apathetic about women’s concerns to being anti-women.”<sup>293</sup> Reagan countered the criticism by endorsing a Federation goal that increased support of Republican women running for public office. He placed Republican National Committee chairs Paul Laxalt and Frank Fahrenkopf in charge.<sup>294</sup> The administration’s answer to any criticism or policy challenge always maintained executive control: men dictated any proposed growth or change, ensuring that the balance of hierarchal power remained stable.

Citizens and legislators alike pushed back on the administration’s treatment of women. By 1983, the backlash against women’s rights became a matter of open public debate. Freelance writer Carrie Johnson’s essay, “The Gender Gap,” drew White House attention, especially for her excoriating comment that “women do notice how male politicians behave when they’re not trying to be nice.”<sup>295</sup> Johnson criticized both Democratic and Republican legislators, noting the tendency to describe men as “hard-working, economically relevant Americans” that acted as the spokesmen for entrepreneurship and trade workers. Routine

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<sup>293</sup> Betty Rendel, President of the National Federation of Republican Women, Letter to Ronald Reagan, March 9, 1983, ID #111395, Office of Policy Development Folder FG 006-01, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>294</sup> Ronald Reagan, Letter to Paul Laxalt and Frank Fahrenkopf, Republican National Committee, April 13, 1983, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>295</sup> Carrie Johnson, “The Gender Gap,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 18, 1983.

references to “women’s issues” and “Reaganomics” separated women from decision-making positions in politics and in business.

All it took was intent and time for conservative coalitions to change the political and social perception of WEEA as a public good into a liability. The rhetoric of the Religious Right combined with the Heritage Foundation’s goals of free enterprise, limited government and individual freedom cloaked in patriarchal values grounded Reagan’s claimed mandate to deregulate and abolish nonessential programs. The conservative preference for traditional “morality” proved to be more marketable than equity. In a parallel to the absence of women’s history in traditional historical narratives, WEEA, feminism and equality were dispensable: easily and conveniently replaced with platitudes.

## CHAPTER V

### WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AS A PRACTICAL COMMODITY

*"The burden of proof lies with those who wish to include, not with those who continue to exclude."*<sup>296</sup>

On a lazy June 2012 weekend, I flipped through the television guide to the HISTORY network. On air, I found the final rounds of the National History Bee competition. In the Bee, students from all over the United States, public and privately schooled, answer rapid-fire questions from all eras of United States and world history, with a substantial mix of cultural references thrown into the mix. Sponsored by the HISTORY network, textbook publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and the National History Bowl and Bee organizations, NBC weathercaster Al Roker served as moderator. Actor Brian Unger hosted. Rutledge Wood and Bob Harris, both affiliated with the HISTORY network, acted as reporter and expert, respectively. Two of the judges had a background in history education: Steve Gillon, HISTORY's scholar-in-residence and a professor of history at the University of Oklahoma; and Rhonda Haynes, editor-in-chief of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's K-12 Social Studies publishing department. The third judge, Greg Bossick, also served as the Assistant Executive Director for the National Bee and Bowl.

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<sup>296</sup> Judith P. Zinsser, "Women's and Men's World History? Not Yet," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 310.

I found it troubling that no girls were among the sixteen students on the screen. As I continued to watch, I became more aware of the questions. Approximately thirty to forty questions tested students' knowledge over the span of the next hour. Only two of these questions mentioned women or had women as the possible answer. The two questions regarding women referenced Oprah Winfrey and Sacajawea as correct answers.<sup>297</sup>

As a historian and gender scholar focused on women's representations in history, I found this marginalization very disturbing. I wondered: where were the girls in this competition? Why were women not included in Bee questions? These questions underscored two of my primary concerns in studying the development and consequences of Women's History Month: the question of how the establishment of a commemorative month could change public perceptions of women's roles in history and what factors interfered in progressing knowledge of women's history.

The erasure of women's identity is routine: erased from history, erased from value, erased from power. After forty-plus years of celebrating an annual Women's History Month commemoration, marginalization of women's history continues in society and in the public practice of history. In effect, women become token products, useful and valuable as merchandise, manufactured with a specific intent by a coalition of institutions: government, education, and economy. These coalitions use media to produce and distribute an ideology that maintains women's subordinate status. Women's history has become a commodity.

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<sup>297</sup> National History Bee, FAQ, [www.historybee.com/faq/](http://www.historybee.com/faq/). Note: the FAQ page has been updated since 2012 and no longer includes references to the lack of women's history included in the History Bee. In the 2011-2012 online Intramural Bee Written Test Sample covering 70 questions, only 10 questions include women in either the question and/or the answer. In seven of these questions, women are offered as the only choices with two of these questions referencing actions taken by women in support of men's pursuits. Only one question directly references a woman.

Portrayals of women, depicted as empowering, nevertheless sustain institutional inequity. Instead of instituting equity, the commodification of women and their history limits efficacy to a single month, suggesting that women are important, within limits.

As sociologist Greg Smith noted, a media product “asks us to get caught up in the story being told, in the world that has been created for us, not to be aware of the behind-the-scenes effort that brought us this story and this world. We tend to forget the thousands of minute decisions that consciously construct this artificial world.”<sup>298</sup> Smith argued that a sender-message-receiver model imparts information, with meaning attached based on one’s position as sender or receiver. While the message sent may have a clear intention according to the sender, its interpretation reflects the receiver’s intent.<sup>299</sup>

### The National Women’s History Project

In an interview, Institute-alum Molly MacGregor recalled that in 1972, she was a 24-year-old 11th grade history teacher. When a student asked for an explanation of the women’s movement, the only reference MacGregor could find in a textbook mentioned the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. The recognition that she had very little knowledge of women’s history, combined with a realization that she had never asked her deceased mother about her life, led MacGregor to enroll in a Sonoma State University graduate program (unspecified). There, MacGregor met Paula Hammett and Bette Morgan. In 1977, the three women began working for the Education Task Force of the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women.

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<sup>298</sup> Greg Smith, “It’s Just a Movie: A Teaching Essay for Introductory Media Classes,” *Cinema Journal* 41, no.1 (Fall 2001): 127.

<sup>299</sup> Greg Smith, “It’s Just a Movie,” 130.

Inspired by the theme weeks (Ocean Week, Farm Week) local schools used to teach specific topics, the trio and Mary Ruthsdottir (another Task Force employee) developed Women's History Week, corresponding with International Women's Day on March 8. Using University of California Berkeley's women's history program as a resource, Gerda Lerner books from the local library, and advised by Black female historians, the group developed a curriculum on women's history. After MacGregor attended the Institute in 1979, the group formed the National Women's History Project (NWHP), as a non-profit dedicated to producing educational material on women's history.<sup>300</sup>

NWHP received its funding through an educational grant from the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA). Established in 1974, the federal agency focused on supporting educational programs for girls and women that challenged the systemic nature of gendered "discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes and assumptions that are reinforced in their educational experience."<sup>301</sup> With a budget of \$6.2 million in 1976, which increased to \$10 million in 1980, WEEA developed educational materials, offered guidance and career counseling, and implemented extensive training programs, in addition to giving financial support to education non-profits.<sup>302</sup> WEEA programs had to follow strict guidelines upholding Title IX and Civil Rights Act standards. State

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<sup>300</sup> Colleen Shalby, "Women's History Month, Another California Export," 2019, <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/los-angeles-times/20190321/281767040562482>. Accessed January 21, 2021. Note: MacGregor's account of post-Institute events cited in the article differs from WAA and Sarah Lawrence College archive documents. MacGregor neglected to mention anyone else's efforts to establish Women's History Week/Month, instead referencing a 1980 phone call from Sarah Weddington acknowledging President Carter's awareness of Sonoma County's Women's History Week commemorations and his desire to duplicate this on a national scale.

<sup>301</sup> Joy Simonson, "The Rise and Decline of the Advisory Council on Women's Educational Equity," *National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity*, [www.napequity.org/uploads/NACWEP](http://www.napequity.org/uploads/NACWEP). Accessed January 21, 2021.

<sup>302</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, WEEA's budget is severely reduced during the Reagan administration. Federal funding ended in 2003.



and local school systems received grants to assist in implementing Title IX programs, especially sports programs and classes for pregnant students. Other contracts went to organizations that published and disseminated monographs and digests based on women.<sup>303</sup>

NWHP used WEEA to produce and distribute educational resources focused on women's history. Pamphlets and posters used a diverse array of cultural, ethnic, occupational, racial, class, and regional experiences as examples. Publicity coordinated with International Women's Day (March 8) commemorations, as well as the continued efforts to establish Women's History Month. Staff of the NWHP developed teaching guides, book lists, and other educational material and strategies. All material sold for nominal fees. Staff also conducted training sessions with interested schools, colleges, libraries, corporations, churches, clubs, unions, government offices, publishers, and the media.

In early 1980, MacGregor used WAA's extensive database to send a letter to all of its coalition members, asking for national support of Women's History Week and including information on NWHP. Noting Carter's refusal to declare a national commemoration of women's history without a joint resolution from Congress, MacGregor urged women's organizations, historical societies, and educators to self-declare the event. In her role as coordinator of the crusade to "bring the National Women's History Week Resolution to life,"

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<sup>303</sup> Many recipients of WEEA grants based their practices on research produced by the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Founded in 1916, AERA studies focused on identifying systemic educational and societal discrimination, with the goal of advancing educational processes. By identifying sources of gender and race disparities, AERA offered educators resources to focus on providing equal access to education by balancing individual student needs and merit with contextual concerns. A major concern for AERA focused on gender bias in educational texts and literature. Research suggested that girls were familiar with reading about the exploits of male characters but boys were less likely to read about female main characters. Susan S. Klein and Patricia E. Ortman, Continuing the Journey toward Gender Equity, *Educational Researcher* Vol. 23, No. 8 (Nov., 1994): 13-21.

Pam Elam also encouraged other Institute participants to use the educational material developed by NWHP.

MacGregor proposed holding press conferences on February 15, Susan B. Anthony's birthdate, to inform media of upcoming events. Echoing WAA's suggestion, MacGregor encouraged churches and religious groups to become involved by recognizing the work of older, female elders. MacGregor suggested that libraries, schools, and universities host speakers, set up displays and exhibits, and acquire books and films that honored women. MacGregor also urged inclusion of immigrant and minority women's histories. The Women's Support Network (the publishing branch of NWHP) facilitated these efforts by creating commemorative posters, buttons, and t-shirts (for \$6.50). NWHP waived all copyrights to materials, allowing duplication as needed.<sup>304</sup>

Since 1980, the NWHP has developed, produced, and distributed a yearly poster, which featured illustrations of women and an inspirational slogan tied to the celebration of National Women's History Month.<sup>305</sup> Frequently used by teachers and librarians, these posters informed pedagogy by highlighting a variety of momentous events and women. The inclusion of role models for young women in curricula inspired familiarity with women's achievements. This in turn expanded historical knowledge, as "this personalized access renders history more immediate, countering the image of the past as remote, unfamiliar, and anonymous."<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Molly MacGregor, Letter to Educators and Organizers, January 22, 1980, Series II. Projects: Education: Institute on Women's History, 1979: Administration: Participants: Commission on the Status of Women (Santa Rosa), 1979-80, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>305</sup> The National Women's History Project, History, <http://www.nwhp.org/aboutnwhp/history.php>. Accessed December 3, 2020.

<sup>306</sup> Edith P. Mayo, "Teaching the First Ladies Using Material Culture," *Magazine of History* 15 (2001): 3.

Annual slogans created a thematic focus for each year's content, ranging from the simple "Women's History" title of 1984, to "Reclaiming the Past...Rewriting the Future," (1988), "Courageous Voices Echoing in Our Lives," (1990), "Nurturing Tradition, Fostering Change," (1991), and "In Every Generation, Action Frees Our Dreams," (1994). The illustrations used on the NWHP posters focused on diverse ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic classes. The portrayals of women covered a wide range of time, from the 1700s to the 1900s. Images frequently emphasized the community aspects of social and political movements. Occasionally, the NWHP posters referenced global women's history.

Through the slogans and the depictions of women, students learned to recognize material culture as primary documents. Used as artifacts, the posters allowed students to examine shifts in political views, as well as the changing roles of women throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Images connected to histories of social and political movements, helping students to contextualize women's access to power. Understanding the context of women's history revealed how historical discourse may "embody assumptions about what audiences already know; like other social texts, they carry on an implicit dialogue with an imagined audience."<sup>307</sup> The discourse that developed through NWHP material reflected common themes and categories of history, and supported a standardized understanding of the material, while also adding women to the overall historical narrative.

As a cultural tool, NWHP material commemorated several areas of history in which women remained underrepresented. The headings of "Science \* Math \* Business \* Sports \*

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<sup>307</sup> Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons, "Exhibiting Women's History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Roy Rosenzweig, Susan Porter Benson, and Stephen Brier (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986): 203.

Language Arts \* Social Science \* Art \* Music” on the 1988 poster correspond to themes commonly taught in K-12 education programs.<sup>308</sup> The utilitarian value of NWHP material focused on presenting easily understood content. The use of bright colors, detailed headlines and taglines, and uncomplicated illustrations made contents understandable to numerous age and grade levels, as well as the public. Illustrations depicted women by name, as well as by the style of clothes worn, the color of their skin, hairstyle, and/or achievement. A significant number of illustrations lacked named identification. These representations could be any woman, a generalized concept or symbol portraying a particular feature or aspect. The absence of identification invoked an emotional response, as one may wonder at the lack of identification and/or try to ascertain which notable women in history the illustrations mimic.

Only the 1994 NWHP poster shows women interacting with men. The absence of men on the other posters and material does not imply that women and men live separate lives, or find the existence of the other gender unimportant, because culturally the connection between genders is recognized and understood. As a commodity, NWHP material presented a very specific point of view and intent that remained open to interpretation. With the ability to influence and shape public awareness of who and what is significant to women’s history, the NWHP material had the potential to address educational equity. However, the decision-making process on which material to include remains unclear. The result is a particular view of women’s history, one determined by the ideology and goals of the NWHP.

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<sup>308</sup> A Google search lists over 40,500,000 references to the subject “Women’s History Month Celebrations.” Random listings address “31 Empowering Ways to Celebrate Women’s History This Month,” <https://www.bustle.com/p/31-empowering-ways-to-celebrate-womens-history-this-month-39856> ; IBM’s “Celebrating the women of IBM Watson for Women’s History Month,” <https://www.ibm.com/blogs/watson/2019/03/celebrating-the-women-of-ibm-watson-for-womens-history-month/>; The Actors Equity Association’s “Famous Activists are Remembered for Women’s History Month,” <https://www.actorsequity.org/news/PR/WomensHistoryMonthFamousActivists/>, for example.

The silences and/or absences of certain women are equally as interesting as those included, as absence also tells a story of potential divisions in women's movements and of sometimes differing philosophies. The dynamics of gender with race, socioeconomic class, and sexuality are frequently unacknowledged, underscoring the historical practice of "women are visible but our history is invisible," making it easier to see one woman rather than contextualize the whole of history.<sup>309</sup>

### Women's History Month as a Commodity

The material developed by NWHF influenced a growing interest in Women's History Month celebrations as both an educational and a cultural experience throughout the 1980s. NWHF staff member, Mary Ruthsdotter noted, "Requests for information are up 60 percent over last year and that's the third consecutive year with increases of that magnitude. The bulk of requests continue to come from schools."<sup>310</sup>

Libraries, museums, churches, and art centers offered hundreds of celebrations every March, in venues often staffed and/or run exclusively by women. News clips referenced poetry readings, piano recitals, women's conferences, award ceremonies, and speaking engagements as common events.<sup>311</sup> The Fort Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* noted a sharp increase in requests for speaking engagements in March 1988, featuring notable women like Geraldine Ferraro, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Marlo Thomas, Donna Shalala, and Vanna White (of letter-turning fame). Women's

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<sup>309</sup> Melosh and Simmons, "Exhibiting Women's History," 209.

<sup>310</sup> Mary Beth Franklin, "A Historic Idea Took Hold of a Nation," *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 1989, 2.

<sup>311</sup> "A reading by poet Gwendolyn Brooks at Faith Evangelical Covenant Church," *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago: IL, March 5, 1989; piano recital at the Smithsonian Institute, *Washington Post*, Washington D.C., March 3, 1989; speaker series, *Sun Sentinel*, Fort Lauderdale: FL, March 20, 1988.

History Month quickly became the “fitting and proper” time to “stress again the importance of the contributions women have made to the world.”<sup>312</sup> While commemorating the successes of Cleopatra, the Queen of Sheba, and Catherine the Great, the special feature in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* also recognized the “excellent contributions made by the “average woman,” noted as “caring mother,” “effective worker,” “dedicated college student,” and “selfless community worker.”

Local women’s commissions and “Hall of Fame” organizations also offered tributes to women’s history. The Hartford (MD) County Commission for Women observed Women’s History Month with a Sunday morning breakfast featuring local jazz star Ethel Ennis and television news anchor Denise Koch.<sup>313</sup> The Baltimore Museum of Industry hosted an exhibit of forty photographs of women working non-traditional jobs. Titled, “The Best Woman for the Job,” the exhibit focused on educating the public on some of the difficulties women faced in gaining employment equity, as “women’s access to the jobs of their choice is actually very limited because men simply don’t know how to work with a woman. The women in these photographs are teaching men on a day-to-day basis.” Many of the women featured in the photographs attended the event, interacting with questions from the audience.<sup>314</sup>

Commodification of both feminism and Women’s History Month began subtly, but increased steadily in the early 1990s as businesses increasingly used women’s interests and concerns to market products. A prime example of the progression in marketing is the

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<sup>312</sup> “Special Report: Women’s History Month,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, Pittsburgh: PA, March 8, 1992, A-6.

<sup>313</sup> “Hartford County Commission for Women, Women’s History Breakfast,” *The Sun*, Baltimore: MD, February 10, 1991, 18.

<sup>314</sup> Wil Hylton, “Celebrating Women’s History: Proving They Can Handle the Same Jobs as Men Every Working Day,” *The Sun*, Baltimore: MD, March 2, 1992, 1C.

development of a breast cancer awareness campaign. The Komen Foundation sponsors its first Komen “Run for the Cure” walk/race in 1983. Breast Cancer Awareness Week follows this. First held in October 1985, the national event featured information programs sponsored by the American Cancer Society and pharmaceutical division of the Imperial Chemical Division. Betty Ford acted as spokesperson, sharing her own experience with breast cancer.<sup>315</sup> By 1991, the marketing of a “pink ribbon campaign” connected high profile endorsements from corporations to name brand products popularized by famous entertainers publicized by charity galas attended by the wealthy - a who’s who of power, tied up neatly by a pink bow. Founder of the Komen Foundation, Nancy Brinker noted, “This is our moment, and we have to make it work for us.”<sup>316</sup>

The success of the Komen Foundation’s awareness campaign developed in conjunction with the growing feminist backlash that favored a return to “femininity” as the symbol of women’s power. In 1991, designer Ralph Lauren teamed with the *Washington Post*’s former publisher Katherine Graham to fund the Nina Hyde Center for Breast Cancer Research.<sup>317</sup> Revlon founder Ron Perelman also invested in breast cancer research in the early 1990s. Revlon joined with other major advertisers from the fashion, cosmetic, and entertainment industries to influence magazine and news coverage. The looped pink ribbon, adapted from the AIDS awareness campaigns, became a symbol easily incorporated into marketing plans. Executive director of the National Alliance of Breast Cancer Organization acknowledged,

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<sup>315</sup> Susan Braun, “The History of Breast Cancer Advocacy,” *The Breast Journal* 9, no. S2 (2002): 101-103.

<sup>316</sup> Lisa Belkin, “Charity Begins at the Marketing Meeting, the Gala Event, the Product Tie In,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1996, 1.

<sup>317</sup> Hyde was a long time fashion editor at the Washington Post and a close friend of Lauren.

“There’s something about breast cancer that makes it very different from any other disease. It’s about body image, it’s about nurturing. It certainly is about femininity. It is loaded for women in ways that other health threats are not.”<sup>318</sup>

Marketers exploited a universal of femininity as a form of sisterhood in much the same way as the Reagan administration used patriarchal rhetoric to idealize women’s value through and to capitalism. Marketers recognized the need for a symbol as a way to activate and control interest. After decades of breaking political, economic, and social boundaries, largely through a practice of activism, women accepted the pink ribbon as a powerful “community” symbol. As a result, women responded to the pink ribbon in many of the same ways they had responded to the women’s movement: as a way to raise consciousness, form sisterhoods, and fight for change.

Like Women’s History Month, Black History Month also underwent a commodification. Publisher Ken Smikle noted, “Black History Month has become big business...a time for companies to demonstrate their appreciation of the patronage they receive from Black consumers.”<sup>319</sup> However, Linda Maddox, associate professor of Marketing and Advertising at George Washington University, cited changing marketing standards to explain the increase in using Black images in product placements. Maddox argued, “The trend has shifted from a situation where companies felt morally, ethically, or legally compelled to show minorities in

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<sup>318</sup> Belkin, “Charity Begins at the Marketing Meeting,” 2.

<sup>319</sup> Michelle I. Norris, “Putting Black History Month on the Market: New Commercialization of Black History Sparks African American Debate,” *The Washington Post*, February 21, 1993, B03.



their advertisements because of outside pressures to a point where advertisers are saying we want that market for its spending power.”<sup>320</sup>

Capitalism redefined the commemorative months of Black history and women’s history into marketing moments. Supermarket chains, grocery stores, United States Postal stamps, fast food restaurants, and soft drink distributors graduated from holding cultural diversity seminars for employees on women and race to promoting Black pride and women’s history symbols in mass marketing campaigns within a matter of a few years without questioning the ramifications of this co-optation. As the chair of Howard University’s Afro-American Studies Department noted, “The financial support for the commercialization does not come from Black America at the corporate level. Will white America now become the interpreters of Black History Month?”<sup>321</sup>

A simplistic view of the images of women’s history portrayed on NWHP posters and the women featured in community Hall of Fame events interprets these depictions as powerful. However, as social media markets rapidly expanded in the 1990s, images of girls and women increasingly focused on the body as symbolic of power, the sole means to achieve importance or influence another. Reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that culture configured identity, advertising increasingly focused on strict standards of beauty (white, thin, big breasts) as the ideal definition of value.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Norris, “Putting Black History Month on the Market,” B03.

<sup>321</sup> Norris, “Putting Black History Month on the Market,” B03.

<sup>322</sup> Jean Kilbourne, “The More You Subtract, the More You Add:” Cutting Girls Down to Size in Advertising,” ed. Rebecca Ann Lind, *Race/Gender/Class/Media 3.0: Considering Diversity Across Audiences, Content, and Producers* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc. 2013), 180.

The cumulative effect of exposure to thousands of daily images that only referenced appearance as valuable turned girls into objects easily dismissed as unimportant: empowerment disguised as power. Commenting on the effect of social media on girls, Jean Kilbourne stated, “It is impossible to know how much of this message is intended... Is it harmless wordplay, or is it a sophisticated and clever marketing ploy based on research about the silencing of girls, deliberately designed to attract them with the promise of at least some form of self-expression?”<sup>323</sup> In the sender-message-receiver model, compliance to this standard of beauty as value equated to empowerment. However, empowerment does not equate to institutional power. One can gain empowerment by changing a personal viewpoint or habit (reading about women’s history, for example), but this does not guarantee political, economic, or social power: the power to change institutional beliefs or practices.

Media scholars that focus on gender use the Bechdel Test to gauge levels of women’s representation in film media. Named for Allison Bechdel’s 1985 comic, this test used three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man.<sup>324</sup> Offered as a challenge to film producers, the Bechdel Test asserted that women have complicated, interesting lives that too often go under-represented. Women’s history, and commemorations of Women’s History Month, offers the same cultural challenge to the historical status quo, delivering valuable messages that women are more than nameless, secondary characters in any story.

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<sup>323</sup> Jean Kilbourne, “The More You Subtract,” 181.

<sup>324</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, “The Bechdel Test for Women in Movies,” *Feminist Frequency*, December 7, 2009, <https://feministfrequency.com/video/the-bechdel-test-for-women-in-movies/>.

## Conclusion

Apparently, I was not the only one to notice the lack of girls in the National History Bee, as a similar question appeared on the FAQ page of the Bee website. I quote the posted question and answer: *Why were there no girls in the National Championships I saw on HISTORY?* Response (author unknown): “The National History Bee understands the value of, and is firmly committed to, a competition field that is diverse in gender, race, experience, and geography. The number of participating schools (and students) in the 2011-2012 school year was just so small that it turned out that one group (males) was disproportionately represented in the Top 16. We were a bit disgruntled by this fact as well but we truly believe that it was not a result of any sort of competition bias and we fully expect that with a much larger field of competition in the 2012-2013 year, there will be no such disproportion.”

I neglected to track the participation of girls in subsequent competitions. However, as my interest in women’s history evolved, and my research on the routine marginalization of women’s history deepened, I did investigate whether the questions asked of participants became more inclusive. The National History Bee and Bowl website offers extensive sample questions that students can use to study.<sup>325</sup> Study guides from 2013 to 2019 are available. When surveying the sample questions, I concluded that little improvement has occurred, despite public commentary on the lack of women’s representation in the History bowls. In particular, I focused on questions from 2018. In over 400 published practice questions for the National History Bee, only 71 references to women appear. Several of these questions relate to fictional women or note women as secondary characters in narratives of men. For example, a

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<sup>325</sup> National History Bee and Bowl Study Guides and Questions, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.historybowl.com/resources/study-guides-resources/>.

bonus question notes Dianne Feinstein's assumption as mayor of San Francisco after the death of Harvey Milk. Likewise, a reference to Calamity Jane (or Martha Jane Canary) notes her burial next to Wild Bill Hickok in Deadwood, South Dakota. Also documented: "First" women, like Tammy Baldwin, as the first openly LGBT Senator; Kim Campbell, as the first female Canadian Prime Minister; Nellie Ross, first female governor (after the death of her husband, William). Joan of Arc did earn her own category of questions, focused largely on events around her death. Suffrage also received special focus, concentrating on the women instrumental in passage of the 19th Amendment.

The nominal inclusion of women from these nationally recognized history events sustains the long established pattern of marginalizing women's history. With so few references made to women in these public forums, the result is a devaluing of women's history. Women remain secondary characters to the larger narratives of history. Questions focused on women become "gotcha" questions - not really a test of historical knowledge but rather a means to discuss the achievements of men.

The lack of women's representation in these forums continues to be largely unquestioned by organizers of the history competitions. In August 2019, I contacted David Madden, current director of the National History Bowl competition. I shared my findings with him, in reference to the lack of women included in practice questions. I stated that the majority of the questions about women noted women's historical worthiness only in their relationship to men. I noted that only two questions reflected achievements of African American women. Pocahontas and Sacajawea are the only Native women that are the subject of questions. No questions included references to Latina women. Baldwin was the only LGBTQ woman included.

Mr. Madden responded to my email quickly, citing the “tens of thousands of past questions available for practice” for students, over the past decade.<sup>326</sup> Madden offered links to additional questions, but did not address the lack of women represented in the questions. Madden’s focus centered on my experience with history bowls (which is none, only as a television viewer and a researcher).

The National History Bee is not alone in minimizing women’s role in national history. The National Academic Quiz Tournament, a provider of standardized quiz bowl championships at the middle school, high school, community college, and college levels since 1996, created extensive guides for the “Ten Most Important” people or events to know on multiple topics.<sup>327</sup> Topics cover a wide range, from world history subjects to American political and social history. Information dates from 2001-2019. Women’s history is largely absent in these guides. With forty topics, only twelve categories reference women. Notably, only the category of “Feminists” has a majority of women listed as “gotta know.” Fairly comprehensive, the feminist category includes both women of color and men, as well as noted white women leaders (Mary Wollstonecraft, Susan B. Anthony, Gloria Steinem). Two topic categories include three women: African American Civil Rights and British Monarchs. In the category “You Gotta Know These People - African American Civil Rights Leaders,” compiled February 2019, three women are included in the list: Shirley Chisolm, Ida B. Wells, and Rosa Parks. Chisolm is noted as the first African American woman elected to Congress and as a supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment. Wells is recognized for her journalism and as a founder of the NAACP. Parks is

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<sup>326</sup> David Madden, Director of National History Bowl, email to Skylar Bre’z, August 7, 2019. Email is in response to my letter to David Madden, August 7, 2019.

<sup>327</sup> National Academic Quiz Tournaments, LLC., “About Us,” Accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.naqt.com/about/>.

documented as a leader in the Montgomery Bus boycott movement. The civil rights organizations Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and the Black Panthers are also included in this list, recognizing only the male leaders.<sup>328</sup> Twenty-two references to women occur in random categories covering over 400 questions.<sup>329</sup> Women are omitted from the majority of the study guides, specifically military history (battles, wars, multiple theaters and time periods), cultural history (Chinese, African, Asian, Native American, middle ages), and political history (assassinations, elections).

The trivialization of women's history in history bowls is problematic, yet emblematic of the stalled progress of educational equity and Women's History Month. As a historian, I want to see improvement over time in the inclusion of women's representation in nationally recognized events and that focus on history. I believe there is room for improvement in these margins. As an educator, I believe it is important that both girls and boys learn and think about women's experiences and contributions to history. Like History bowls, Women's History Month events offer accessible opportunities for students to expand their historical knowledge. By including more questions that address women's experiences, and questions that feature diverse

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<sup>328</sup> National Academic Quiz Tournaments, LLC., "You Gotta Know These African-American Civil Rights Leaders," accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.naqt.com/you-gotta-know/african-american-civil-rights-leaders.html>.

<sup>329</sup> Specifically listed as "gotta know:" Indira Gandhi (Assassinations), Amelia Earhart (Aviators), Elizabeth I, Elizabeth II, and Victoria (British monarchs), Margaret Thatcher (British Prime Ministers), suffragettes (British Reform Movements), Sacajawea (footnoted as the "wife" of John Cook - explorers), Mary Baker Eddy (religious traditions), Sojourner Truth (modern speeches), Molly Pitcher (Revolutionary War battles), Catherine the Great (Russian csars), and Hilary Clinton (Secretary of State, noting her role in Benghazi). The topic "You Gotta Know These American Third Parties," references only political parties established by men. Excluded from this list is the National Women's Party, formed in 1916 and instrumental in the struggle to obtain women's suffrage.

populations, more students see themselves reflected in history. This makes history more interesting and personally important.

Prizes for the various history bowls typically take the form of scholarships. Typically, these scholarships pay for additional involvement in history bowl competitions and public recognition. With fewer girls participating in history competitions, the educational benefits of scholarships becomes limited to the boys participating. This reinforces the “disproportionate representation” cited by the History Bee as problematic. In addition, the lack of questions that include or reference women’s history limits the knowledge learned by history students, both girls and boys. This creates and continues the cycle of minimization and marginalization of women’s history.

History, like media, indelibly intertwines with culture, creating catalogues of place, time, identity, and traditions of cultural interactions within different societies. No one questions the presence of white male protagonists in history, or questions their portrayal as powerful identities. Yet, women’s history is routinely commodified, obscured, and/or dismissed as having less institutional value.

## CHAPTER VI

### WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH, REMEMBERED

The posters produced and distributed by the National Women's History Project to educate the public about Women's History Month are examples of the general knowledge required of traditional standards of collective memory. Taken at face value, subjects of the Women's History Month Project posters focus on great deeds of women who stand out in history. However, while reference to NWHP's political involvement may be included as citations in tiny print at the bottom of the poster, the intricacies of women's participation in history go unrecognized by the unaware public. Physical paper size limits the detail required for placing women's experiences in the larger historical narrative. As a result, public collective memory recognizes only the decontextualized examples given, without consideration of any larger story. Viewed individually, the poster takes on whatever meaning the viewer inscribes. Viewed as a series published over many years, the politics and ideology framed by the posters illustrate cultural changes. The long-term political concentration on women as leaders eulogizes success stories that support the NWHP's ideology of notable achievements *by women* as crucial to history.

Scholarly debates on memory overwhelmingly focus on the development of these social, cultural, and political spaces, while frequently neglecting the significance of gender on historical actors. By routinely marginalizing or forgetting women's historical roles, cultural memory mirrored the traditional androcentric narration of history. Historians Sylvia Paletschek and



Sylvia Schraut argued in *The Gender of Memory: Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe* that women and men have distinct ways of remembering, based on their different life experiences. While the public sphere in which they spend the majority of their time informs men, women's involvement in family and the home developed intimate knowledge of the private sphere.<sup>330</sup> Gender roles influenced memory and continually re-inscribed the social practices favored by the practice of collective memory.<sup>331</sup> Memory, like history, stores the dominant narrative.

#### Arguments and Assumptions of Early Memory Studies

The experiences of one person form the foundation of individual memory. While one's social location, opinions, beliefs, and attitude may influence the interpretation of a memory, its genesis is singular and personal. One's senses mark an event as significant. As sociologist Maurice Halbwachs explained, a thought, idea, feeling, or passion builds a connection, an echo that attaches a relative value to the event or experience.<sup>332</sup> As a result, individuals remember.

The collective joins memories into an extended relationship between history, memory, and society. This connection creates context and intersection with other thoughts and influences.<sup>333</sup> The collective memory stabilizes social consciousness, defining norms and values.

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<sup>330</sup> Sylvia Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut, *The Gender of Memory: Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe* (Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag, 2008), 7.

<sup>331</sup> Paletschek and Schraut, *The Gender of Memory*, 10.

<sup>332</sup> Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40-45.

<sup>333</sup> Halbwachs and Coser, *On Collective Memory*, 40.

One's position in society influences the ways in which one's memories take shape within that society. Communication with others lends significance to the event. While the autobiographical memory of group members fades through lack of contact with each other, public commemorations and/or rituals that celebrate heroic events or actors help historical or collective memory endure.<sup>334</sup> The collective memory incorporates great events into defining narratives as a means to strengthen community bonds and to enforce the norms and values of the present society.

Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Halbwachs' theories of memory reflected the general absence of gender awareness active at the time. Referencing women's experiences as part of the historical narrative would have been paradoxical to the beliefs, interests, and goals of a present that reflected a collective androcentric memory of the past. Despite arguing, "Collective memory cannot serve as a distinct prop to the prevailing historical period if the past is seen as totally alien," Halbwachs' neglected to recognize gender as a subject with historical context.<sup>335</sup> Any inclusion of women (e.g., Joan of Arc, Catherine the Great, Jane Addams) in the collective memory of history acted as examples of the heroic: women acting like men, idealized for their courage, nobleness, or outstanding public achievements.

Individual memory may inform collective memory, but the collective memory will become the landmark due to the overwhelming power of the social framework. French historian Pierre Nora builds on Halbwachs' framework theory, claiming that memory develops at a particular point in history, at a conscious break with the past. These sites of memory, or

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<sup>334</sup> Halbwachs and Coser, *On Collective Memory*, 23-26.

<sup>335</sup> Halbwachs and Coser, *On Collective Memory*, 26.

*lieux de memoire* contain historical continuations of experiences that no longer exist.<sup>336</sup> The individual memory becomes part of the *miliuex de memoire*, the collective environment of memory combined with history and society, to give the memory context.

As societies shift and/or end, the values protected by the collective memories of the society modify from memory to history. Subject to affective or symbolic recollections, memory maintains the collective heritage of a society through preservation of traditions, origins, and/or myths. These remembrances create perceptions of the past that reflect the present. Nora asserted that history acts as a filter for memory: informed but not bound by memory's multiple inventions of society.<sup>337</sup>

Through public celebrations and media, Women's History Month became the filter through which women could establish and nourish the collective tradition of an inclusive history. Women's History Month heroes evoked an identity of action, of strength in the face of limitations. Placing the heroic woman into the collective memory connected the individual to the action and strength required by society. For example, Rosa Parks' individual experience as a southern black female bus rider takes on epic proportions through the collective language and images that commemorate the Civil Rights movement. The imagination of the collective memory adhered to "frameworks of memory" that communicate certain images. These frameworks react to Halbwachs' defined "time, space, and the order of physical and social events," and explain the usefulness of collective memory to building historical narratives.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.

<sup>337</sup> Nora, "Between Memory and History," 11.

<sup>338</sup> Halbwachs and Coser, *On Collective Memory*, 172-4.

Nora noted the significant shift from archives produced solely by the Church, the state, and great families to public archives that record a proliferation of documents, acknowledging that, “the transformation of memory implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance.”<sup>339</sup> Nora also observed that the memory of the past can no longer be retrieved or recalled without being influenced by today’s knowledge of history, as “the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals.”<sup>340</sup> Until scholars began to revise their understanding of that framework during the 1990s, women’s history remained a symbolic rib of History, its origin firmly tied to collective memory of “women,” as written largely by men.

Memory’s influence on identity remains useful as a means to “revitalize” one’s own history.<sup>341</sup> As Nora asserted, memory origins based on tradition and ritual establish identity, by preserving specific identities.<sup>342</sup> Likewise, commemorations call forth these identities, marking them as heroic through public rituals and ceremonies. The observation process of commemoration holds national attention, preserving memory by developing an origin or awareness of value.

Like Nora, cultural historian Michael Kammen addressed the connection between collective memory and national identity, positing that expansions in archived sources as well as an alliance between social criticism and historical understanding facilitated new categorizations

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<sup>339</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 14-5.

<sup>340</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 16-7.

<sup>341</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 14.

<sup>342</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 15.

of collective memory. Kammen observed that frequently women maintained the national identity of patriotism. By collecting and preserving relics of the past, by documenting experiences in diaries and autobiographies, by teaching children their ancestral histories, women preserved pride in the national history.<sup>343</sup> Wealthy white women sponsored the research of male historians, as well as undertaking extensive scholarly explorations of their own.<sup>344</sup> Many women called for education reform, placing history at the center of developing new curriculum.

Kammen also observed that every aspect of society shifted in the 1960s, prompting changes in the field of history. The value of folklore centers and archives began to be recognized, offering information about underrepresented groups.<sup>345</sup> In the 1980s, material culture added important details to the national narrative, giving authority to sources previously absent from traditional archives. The earlier standardization of historical narratives lost favor to adaptation, as the American national identity shifted its focus to value diversity. The resulting national history became the product of the collective memory of its people, but also represented the invented patriotism and nationalism of its historians, who narrated a collective memory of events that shaped national understanding with claims of “objectivity.”<sup>346</sup>

The extensive archiving of material culture added important details to the collective narrative, giving authority to sources previously excluded from traditional archives. However,

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<sup>343</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 266-7.

<sup>344</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 268.

<sup>345</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 680.

<sup>346</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 6-8.

gender stereotypes routinely dismissed women's work in generating historical narratives as inconsequential, amateur, or misguided. In the early 1960s, the executive director of the Virginia Commission stated the necessity for quickly creating Civil War centennial re-enactment programs for schoolchildren, because, "If we wait too long, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of Union Veterans, and other hen houses may embark on separate programs that will clash, be inadequate, and be unbalanced."<sup>347</sup>

The development of a patriarchal historical tradition required uncontested narratives. Like Halbwachs, Kammen attributed changes in historical narration to shifts of norms and values. While male historians made a public claim for a democratic identity of collective memory, in practice history maintained its androcentric preservation of memory, as "an extension of the personal memory, and an extension which masses of people can share, so that it becomes, or would ideally become the memory of a nation, or of humanity."<sup>348</sup> As an ideology, history claimed no boundaries. As a practice, history reflected the public memory that shaped a nation's character and sense of identity, through the singular lens of men. Kammen argued that in order for national narratives to be based on the traditions and rituals that resulted in normative values, the narratives had to subdue influences of gender, race, class, and other differences in favor of a "tradition of progress."<sup>349</sup> This progress narrative

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<sup>347</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 608. This argument does have validity, as "history" and monuments supported by the United Daughters of the Confederacy led to mass-produced textbooks that glorified the South's role in the Civil War and established monuments to Confederate military heroes throughout the US. See Karen Cox's *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*, (University Press of Florida, 2003).

<sup>348</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 503.

<sup>349</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 14.

ascribed universal values to the nation, conveniently excluding individuals or groups of people from common narratives.

For social scientist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, history told the story of power: both “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened.” Articulated from the perspective of historical actors, “what happened” emphasized the socio-historical process, the effect on society. The knowledge that resulted from that which is said to have happened produced the collective memory of events.<sup>350</sup> Like Nora and Kammen, Trouillot recognized that the boundary between the history of what happened and how it is remembered as happening relies on context for interpretation. Stating, “we are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence,” Trouillot argued that awareness of how and why a particular narrative has been constructed delivers important clues to its interpretation.<sup>351</sup>

To this end, Trouillot questioned the “thinkability” of certain aspects of history.<sup>352</sup> Trouillot argued that history that has its roots in the positivism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century favored an indisputable boundary between historical process and historical knowledge. This positivist history used scientific distinctions to reflect a history written by and for the winners, i.e. white European men in power. This power was viewed as “unproblematic,” a consequence of victory and influence.<sup>353</sup> The resulting historical narratives reflected the

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<sup>350</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>351</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix, 3-4.

<sup>352</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 82.

<sup>353</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 5.

created power structure, giving little recognition to gender, race, socioeconomic class, or other cultural differences.

Because history is a social process, people are remembered in history as agents, actors, or subjects. Historical agents occupy privileged positions in the social structure. Actors also cooperate with the social structure, by giving context to the historical narrative through recognition of their social class or status. By defining the sociocultural, political, economic, and/or ideological structures of agents and actors through narratives, history memorializes value. However, subjects of history only add definition in service to historical events. Lacking a voice, the subject is limited to observation and cannot exert any influence over the process of history.<sup>354</sup> In effect, the subject becomes generalized and silenced.

Trouillot cited Pierre Bourdieu, who addressed the necessity of concepts, methods, and techniques that problematized historical understanding. Until the political frameworks of history could interrogate predisposed “facts,” any history other than androcentric history was unimaginable.<sup>355</sup> Trouillot contended that the production of history utilized silence at four fundamental moments: at the making of sources, at the creation of an archive, in the production of a narrative, and at the moment of historical significance.<sup>356</sup> As conceptual tools, these processes build on and support the development of a collective narrative. Yet, in every

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<sup>354</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23.

<sup>355</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 82.

<sup>356</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 24.



narrative, someone is silenced. It is only in uncovering the neglected sources and giving agency to all subjects that the silence becomes thinkable.<sup>357</sup>

Even though explicit discussions of gender are largely absent from the arguments and assumptions of these early examples of memory study, the frameworks of memory, history, and society sustain a relationship of compatibility. Early memory theorists acknowledged the role of tradition and ritual in developing both individual and collective memory. The act of remembering reinforced history. Memory also strengthened social bonds, building commonality. Narratives formed through social commemoration, acting as a determinant of identity, even in the silenced spaces.

#### Adding Gender to Memory Studies

Early generations of women's historians had long recognized women's experiences as valuable historical events, using examples of social history, labor history, abolition, and suffrage to highlight the silence of exclusion. In the 1970s, postmodern understandings of narrative construction began to shift the academic environment towards more inclusion of women as historical agents, actively producing history.

One of the original intentions of the Sarah Lawrence College Institute on Women's History focused on the development of archives. Ruth Abram and Gerda Lerner agreed that encouraging woman's organizations to save documents and artifacts would be beneficial to everyone. Women's organization could use their records to monitor progress, track resources, and develop databases of information. Historians benefited from these resources as well, as

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<sup>357</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49.

research material useful for expanding knowledge of women's organizations and interactions. The resulting archives would become a continuing consciousness of women's history: one that actively illustrated women's experiences within organizations (a topic Lerner opined as under-developed) while teaching women the historic value of their work.

Narratives developed through the examination of an archive; sometimes based on written documents, but often using additional cultural sources. Oral histories, photos, artwork, poetry, fiction, pamphlets - anything that denoted time, space, and/or population, represented the early archive of women's history commemorations. However, the credibility of a source was frequently a matter of its access to power, based on a memory of its language and symbols. Because the language and symbols used by colonized groups may not have relied on written documentation or followed rules of the colonizer, the language was devalued, stripped of its historical significance.<sup>358</sup> The discrediting of women's experiences occurred in the same manner. Isolated from social, political, and economic power, traditional historical narratives utilized women's experiences only in support of hegemonic constructions of patriarchal power.

Both individual and collective memories reflect these constructions of power. By recognizing that history develops as both an independent experience of events and as a collective knowledge of events, or as Trouillot asserted, "each historical narrative renews a claim to truth."<sup>359</sup> This is the benefit of memory studies to the field of History. Memory studies questioned all aspects of the creation of narratives: the agents, the actors, and the subjects, as

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<sup>358</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 7.

<sup>359</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 6.

well as the historicized social process.<sup>360</sup> Memories become representations of events, interpreted and practiced through systems or constructions of power.

Questioning the selection and communication of knowledge that legitimized commemorations challenged the limitations of earlier memory studies. Given its public nature, the collective memory of History adopted the masculine public sphere as the basis of creating a cohesive narrative. In her 1987 essay, "History as Image: Changing the Lens," Burstyn argued that historians frequently failed to incorporate new ideas present in the collective memory. As a result, narrative shifts in perspective became rare or incomplete. Burstyn also asserted that knowledge undergoes a process of selection, construction, distribution, and transmission, through which the control of knowledge is exposed and then legitimized or discarded. As a practice, gender and memory become significant in the process of knowledge legitimization because both verify cultural attitudes and beliefs, as well as reveal biases present in knowledge selection.

In support of her claims, Burstyn offered examples from late twentieth century textbooks: i.e. the dreaded pink boxes that marginalize women's experiences as separate from the male-dominated master narrative. Widely used as teaching tools, textbooks influence students' emotional and cognitive reactions. By placing women into separate but distinct formats within textbooks, students learn that certain women are outliers of history: remarkable, yet separate from established historical narratives.<sup>361</sup> Commemorative history months create a similar response. March, as the marker of Women's History Month, becomes

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<sup>360</sup>Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23.

<sup>361</sup> Joan N. Burstyn, "History as Image: Changing the Lens." *History of Education Quarterly* 27: (1987): 171.

the only legitimate period in the calendar year in which the study of women's history is necessary and/or applicable to history. Similarly, February becomes the framework for awareness of race and racism, and April focuses attention to sexual assault. These commemorations provide needed information while also delivering master narratives that suggest social change is possible, if we just learn enough.

Basing her argument on evidence from a 1984 study of the integration of women's studies into university curriculums, Burstyn asked historians to examine how knowledge is selected, positing that the editorial choices made result in the development of a specific gendered narrative.<sup>362</sup> In detailing her experience as editor-in-chief of a book of biographies of New Jersey women, Burstyn illustrated the implication of how specific knowledge influenced memory. Inclusion of women in the collected volume of biographies referenced only stories that fit a certain criteria and fulfilled an explicit historical goal. Editors of the biographies selected notable women based on available resources. The inclusion of nationally recognized women utilized archived public sources. Conversely, a lack of documentation excluded many women. The knowledge produced by the deliberate inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds and experiences expanded awareness of racial, socioeconomic, and sexuality issues. However, the omission of certain representation of women's experiences devalued other knowledge. For Burstyn, this process of elimination highlighted examples of past historians, who focused on one gender and then made broad generalizations about all people, or who referenced public experience and excluded private actions. Mirroring Trouillot's claim

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<sup>362</sup> Burstyn, "History as Image," 170.

that narratives illustrate and decipher the subject of study, Burstyn recognized that inclusion in an archive legitimized historical representation.

Likewise, historian Carolyn Steedman argued in her 1998 essay, “The Space of Memory: In an Archive,” that history is located in memory, as a process of remembering, of imagining or ideation. The content of the historical description shapes archived knowledge, or the “technology of remembering.”<sup>363</sup> Indexed and catalogued in the archive, memory acts “as an idea as much as an active place,” that orders everything: consciously chosen documents as well as fragments of information.<sup>364</sup> The archive does not place a value on the information it contains. Valuation is a result of collective memory: an outcome of the value placed on the knowledge and information simply because it is contained and produced by the archive. The archive is the connection to the institutionalization and administration of law. Through classification of texts, documents, data, or what memory scholar Luisa Passerini would argue happens through the individual and/or collective process, and what Burstyn would equate with knowledge legitimization, the archive defines the parameters of the resulting the narrative.<sup>365</sup> In the archive, information waits placement into a narrative.

Commemoration validates the archive, by attaching meaning. Commemoration happens as a process of memory, as a constructed archive reliant on both history and memory. One relies on the other in a non-linear interchange of power. Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith’s essay, “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,” acts as an example of Steedman’s

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<sup>363</sup> Carolyn Steedman, “The Space of Memory: In an Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (1998): 66.

<sup>364</sup> Steedman, “The Space of Memory,” p. 67.

<sup>365</sup> Luisa Passerini, “A Memory for Women’s History: Problems of Method and Interpretation,” *Social Science History* 16 (1992): 670.

methodology applied to gender. Citing images of Ellis Island by photographer Lorie Novak as the archive, Hirsch and Smith posit a narrative based on both cultural and gender memory. Acknowledging the focus of feminist scholarship as the retrieval and inclusion of women's experiences, narrated through stories and artifacts, the authors question assumptions of gender in cultural or collective memory. Hirsch and Smith welcome what they view as parallel and co-existing scholarly interests: memory study and feminist studies, as "countermemories" that challenge constructed history by calling into question the norms, conventions, and practices of both commemoration and history. Like Trouillot's theories of agent, actor, and subject, constructions of agency and cultural power demand context as "acts of transfer," which defines individuals and groups by recalling archived knowledge of a shared past.<sup>366</sup> The common norms of this past may be contested, as cultural memory reflects "past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears and desires."<sup>367</sup> Hirsch and Smith also recognize memory as "acts of performance, representation, and interpretation."<sup>368</sup> Gender becomes a representation of this sometimes deliberate, sometimes unconscious performance, as collective memory works to consolidate representations of gender through commemoration.

Keeping in mind Burstyn's process of knowledge production (selection, followed by construction, distribution, transmission, and legitimization), Passerini's essay "A Memory for

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<sup>366</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." *Signs* 28 (2002): 6.

<sup>367</sup> Hirsch and Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory," 8.

<sup>368</sup> Hirsch and Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory," 11.

Women's History: Problems of Method and Interpretation," illustrates Hirsch and Smith's focus on the performance of gender, with regard to the complex memories associated with both the global women's movement and women's history. While Passerini's research is located in Italian feminist history, she makes salient observations of U.S. feminist and women's history. Passerini argued that feminist memory is episodic, subject to the influence of feminist movements and history in general.<sup>369</sup> As a result, the collective memory of women's history is subjective: non-scientific and linear. With its reliance on hierarchal "data," commemoration, like history, privileges the quantitative over the qualitative. The commemoration of National Women's History Month illustrates this argument through its reliance on oft-repeated histories of heroic women offset by progressive narratives of overcoming obstacles, in spite of gender, race, socioeconomic, and/or sexuality differences.

Passerini proposed that data from collective memory be gathered through a language of "reciprocity, exchange, and mutual pleasure," as a phase of discourse rather than as a limited product resulting in a linear history.<sup>370</sup> Just as Halbwachs' and Burstyn's work cited the imagination as a major source of information for the collective memory, Passerini recognized that language becomes a primary resource, requiring individual and collective self-reflection. Using language, the tool of memory allows multiple historical identities to co-exist.<sup>371</sup> By reframing gender as a positive dynamic of history, rather than (at minimum) an inconvenience, historical narratives expand, become more inclusive and reflective of lived experience. As is, language plays a major role in communicating gender expectations and differences,

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<sup>369</sup> Passerini, "A Memory for Women's History," 670.

<sup>370</sup> Passerini, "A Memory for Women's History," 689.

<sup>371</sup> Passerini, "A Memory for Women's History," 676.

necessitating continual effort to insert a diversity of women into historical narratives. Because histories that recognize gender narratives pose a threat to the stability of longstanding androcentric collective memories, an analysis of objectivity is required for the inclusion of gender in memory studies. As Burstyn noted, individual memories of women's involvement in events inform the collective memory that develops.<sup>372</sup> In addition, individual memory of gender influences the collective enactment of gender. Just as collective memories quicken the process from memory to history, gender informs the political participation in society, by deciding acceptable language and disregarding differences. Giving the example of slogans used during the feminist movement, Passerini cited the danger of oral history as one of language, applicable to memory as well. Passerini noted that without self-reflection, passionate entreaties for civil rights could be misinterpreted as victimization. Emblems of women's history, so often supported only by oral accounts or alternative documentation (diaries, recipe books, handwritten notes in a journal), are easily and routinely disregarded, relegated to the mundane and therefore without consequence. As a result, memory clouded the relationship between feminist movements and history, making the multiple identities of the individual and the collective experience difficult to separate.

Historians Sylviz Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut focused on two forms of memory that complicate the incorporation of women's experiences into historical narratives: communication and cultural memory. Communication, based in language usage, is informal, while cultural memory is organized and institutionalized. As a result, memory becomes politically contested, linked with national identities that represent gender in specific ways. National Women's

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<sup>372</sup> Burstyn, "History as Image," 166.



History Month and the NWHP posters are examples of this formula, focusing significant attention to named women rulers or members of ruling families in national histories. Like Paletschek and Schraut, historian Helke Rausch attributed this limited representation of women to the desire to maintain a progress narrative in which historical figures are representative national reference points.<sup>373</sup> In her essay examining the marginal figures of the western European nations, Rausch highlights the incomplete narrative created by essentializing exclusive historical figures. Women's history becomes a heroes narrative, as limited in scope as traditional History, doomed to repeat established victories and defeats.

In comparison, Astrid Swenson argued that feminist movements were officially apolitical, working chiefly through interpersonal connections. Her essay on memory, gender, and antifascism in 1930s France and England shows that as long as facilitated navigation of cultural, political, and economic barriers remains in the collective memory, little institutional or national change results.<sup>374</sup> Views of equality and assumptions of difference remain linked to the cultural constructions of national identity. Likewise, in examining the Finnish gender politics post World War II, Tiina Kinnunen argued that women must be integrated into national and international history in order to deconstruct history.<sup>375</sup> Without a collective memory that includes all members of the identified subject, the narratives reflect a commemorated bias that

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<sup>373</sup> Helke Rausch, "Marginal Figure in the Nation: Gendered National Memories in Late Nineteenth Century Western European Metropolises," *The Gender of Memory: Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Sylvia Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut (Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag, 2008), 31.

<sup>374</sup> Astrid Swenson, "Memory, Gender, and Antifascism in France and Britain in the 1930s," in *The Gender of Memory: Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Sylvia Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut (Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag, 2008), 129.

<sup>375</sup> Tiina Kinnunen, "Gender and Politics: Patriotic Women in Finnish Public Memory after 1944," in *The Gender of Memory: Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Sylvia Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut (Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag, 2008), 181.

enculturates an inaccurate gender identity, as well as a false national identity. While deconstruction challenges the constructed narratives, the limitations placed on the historical identities of both women and nation remain, continually reinforced by collective memories. To some degree, by challenging claims to public and private identities, the commemoration of Women's History Month removed limitations placed on both women and History by adding new narratives and by deconstructing a singular notion of "woman." However, the designation of a commemorative month did not remove the prejudice that remains in the collective memory.

In their text *Gender and Memory*, Leydesdorff, Passerini, and Thompson caution against universalizing distinctions of memory based on gender differences, as individual ways of remembering may fluctuate from assumed cultural norms. For Leydesdorff, et al., to evaluate the interaction between gender and memory, context is essential.<sup>376</sup> Informed by time, space, and language, gendered cultural socializations in turn inform memory. While psychological reports that address gender as a component of memory posit that women remember personal events with more clarity than men do, the assumptions of gender differences may not reflect cultural context.<sup>377</sup> Gender remains constructed and always present, a reflection of the culture in which it exists. In History, the prevalence of men's experiences commonly illustrates narratives of public events ruled by men and portrayals of women as helpmates to men or actors only in the private sphere.

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<sup>376</sup> Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson, *Gender and Memory* (New York: NY, 2005), 3.

<sup>377</sup> Leydesdorff, et al., *Gender and Memory*, 4.

Leydesdorff, et al. speculates that feminist scholarship used oral history as a means to introduce unheard voices into history. Absent from this argument is the acknowledgement that traditional, male-oriented history also relies on oral history to develop narratives, yet escapes much of the questions of validity experienced by women's oral history. Is this due to assumptions of emotional veracity that inform cultural stereotypes of gender? In this case, Leydesdorff, et al., genderize oral history. While Leydesdorff, et al., do appreciate the development of new "truths" that are understood to be subjective and diverse, illustrative of cultural, political, and economic power dynamics, they also assert that recognition of subjectivity is fundamental to understanding how the resulting information is used. The disclosure of silenced voices leads to new social realities, necessitating new understandings. Facilitated by the cultural turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the interpretations of Leydesdorff, et al., reflect when "the subjectivity of oral sources came to be seen as a point of strength, a vital clue to changing consciousness, rather than as an intrinsic weakness."<sup>378</sup> Memory also replicates these interactions, as well as having to answer to time, space, and language. The authors insist that memory and history require "empirical work and historical knowledge," and cannot rely on theory alone to build a multivocal space.<sup>379</sup> The authors argue that in support of this multiplicity, science must be blended with the subjective to avoid an over-development of a dominant history, through the development of an acknowledged archive.

Leydesdorff, et al. also question what makes some memories more significant, and how this dominance relates to other types of subjugation. Deeply intertwined, memory and power

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<sup>378</sup> Leydesdorff, et al., *Gender and Memory*, 5.

<sup>379</sup> Leydesdorff, et al., *Gender and Memory*, 6.

reflect language, as expressed through constructions of cultural norms, through boundaries of public and private space.<sup>380</sup> History tells the story of whoever is most dominant. In order to gain greater understanding of the production of gender barriers, the authors propose an examination of the historical boundaries between women and men. By deconstructing the historical use of the male universal, and examining how the definitions of “woman” and “man” are interrelated and mutually constructing, the gender boundary reveals a power relation rather than a concrete difference.<sup>381</sup> The definition of gender as difference preserves the cultural understanding of such, creating an expectation of difference, which silences. In her essay on Basque women within a male singing style, Carmen Larranaga acknowledged that recognition implies genuineness, an identification of value, naturalness, and presence. To be genuine is to be accepted, yet this acceptance is based on the collective memory of public space as being the domain of men, in the Basque culture.<sup>382</sup> Larranaga explained that men traditionally dominated outdoor gatherings, meeting in the public square to sing and share stories that celebrated the Basque culture. Women’s presence was not acceptable during these celebrations. Larranaga argued that this lack of acceptance in public space was a reflection of cultural memory. Only allowed to sing within the home, women’s public silencing reflected the cultural privilege of men. This example illustrates the one of the challenges of identity boundaries in History. Nationally recognized during March commemorations, women’s history remains relatively silenced during the rest of the year.

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<sup>380</sup> Leydesdorff, et al., *Gender and Memory*, 7-8.

<sup>381</sup> Leydesdorff, et al., *Gender and Memory*, 7.

<sup>382</sup> Carmen Larranaga, “Ubiquitous but Invisible: The Presence of Women Singers within a Basque Male Tradition,” in *Gender and Memory*, eds. Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59.

Memory theorist Renate Siebert posited that the suppression of women was out of fear of the feminine, a deliberate silencing of the “uncontrollable maternal.”<sup>383</sup> Using the example of the Sicilian mafia, Siebert explored the power of silence and the power of memory within Mafia life, which expects members to see nothing, say nothing, and know nothing. Recognized as a violent one, the masculine world rejects any feminine quality. Siebert asserted that the rejection of the feminine hid a fear of the maternal as an untrustworthy and untamable “other,” a woman who cannot be relied on completely, because “when aroused, she knows no compliance, no loyalty, no respect, and no fear.”<sup>384</sup> Paradoxically, while comprised of only men, “Mama” is the nomenclature for the mafia by its members.<sup>385</sup> In play is the ideological understanding of gender roles, the knowledge that women maintain the internal structure of the Mafia, through kinship relationships and instillation of values of honor, shame, and vendetta. The structure of the family is the organizational model, reliant on networks of exchange and help. However, the women belong to the Mafia, and have no freedom to choose whether to stay or leave.<sup>386</sup> Similarly, Kate Darian-Smith examined portrayals of Australian women as pin-up models in military propaganda during World War II as another site marked by gendered ideological, political, and economic collective memories that both silence and celebrate women. Citing a “politics of remembrance,” Darian-Smith posited that war created

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<sup>383</sup> Renate Siebert, “Women and the Mafia: The Power of Silence and Memory,” in *Gender and Memory*, eds. Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>384</sup> Siebert, “Women and the Mafia,” 76.

<sup>385</sup> Siebert, “Women and the Mafia,” 77.

<sup>386</sup> Siebert, “Women and the Mafia,” 79.

specific gender roles regarding sexuality. Routinely objectified, women's bodies became a publicity stunt to encourage male desire for the war and the role of hero.<sup>387</sup>

### Contemporary Practicalities of Memory Studies

By including gender in an analysis of memory studies, the remembrance of historical events becomes more inclusive and reflective of collective experiences. When applied, the insertion of gender into memory studies increases recording and understanding of memory. Oral histories and autobiography gain greater authority as sources of historical narrative. Language acts as the marker of the intersectional qualities of the collective practices of gender, memory, and history. Women become political agents and actors, active participants in all aspects of society. The addition of gender forces a new perspective on earlier works by questioning assumptions that either exclude or minimize gendered experiences. Well-developed and inclusive practices benefit women and men, as well as the discipline of History, legitimizing memory as knowledge produced and experienced collectively.

Memory studies as a category of History shares common roots and language with women's history. Tracing the academic interest in memory to the 1970s, when museums, autobiographies, and family genealogy captured the public imagination, historian Kerwin Klein viewed collective memory as an "antihistorical discourse."<sup>388</sup> Through public commemorations, memory came to be associated with politics, as a means to rationalize a

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<sup>387</sup> Kate Darian-Smith, "Remembrance, Romance, and Nation: Memories of Wartime Australia," in *Gender and Memory*, eds. Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 151.

<sup>388</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (Winter 2000): 127.

group memory. Used as a keyword or theory, memory constructed a past, a popular culture based on oral history, autobiography, and/or commemorative rituals.<sup>389</sup> Klein observed that “memory” replaced the old rivals of history: nature, culture, language. Rather than interpret memory as complementary to history, memory became contrary and antagonistic, projecting “immediacy,” as a synonym to make history more accessible, more human.<sup>390</sup>

Klein also described memory using covertly gendered terms: squishy, affective, a psychic event, “angels of our nature.”<sup>391</sup> For Klein, memory acts as a social event, maintained by books, holidays, statues, and souvenirs. As the product of material placeholders and social practices, memory revealed past debts and categorized “moral continuity,” in much the same way as perceptions of women as mistresses of hearth and home, responsible for the social calendar and maintenance of kinship relationships.<sup>392</sup> This identification of memory with gender also ties memory to the symbolic, to identification of the self, and with political subjectivity: all features of the postmodern cultural shift that influenced academia in the 1990s.

In his 1997 essay, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” Alon Confino observed that memory studies had become more of a practice of cultural history than a theory used to develop a common sense of the past. For Confino, the usefulness of memory stemmed from its applicability in constructing diverse societies and periods.<sup>393</sup> The “topics of

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<sup>389</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 128.

<sup>390</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 129.

<sup>391</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 130.

<sup>392</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 130.

<sup>393</sup> Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (Dec 1997): 1386.

inquiry” found in museums, monuments, films, and cultural icons fragmented the field of memory study into sound bites or fashionable tropes. As Confino asserted, historical analysis developed context. For memory to be useful, it needed to “articulate the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience.”<sup>394</sup> For example, while it might be inspiring to feature a dozen women on Women’s History Month posters, the resulting memory created only a label, not a history. Yet, in order for the poster to reflect a particular theme of Women’s History Month that related the cultural to the social and/or political, the images are necessary to contextualize the history. In turn, the representative images represent a particular point of view. Analysis of this historical context formed conclusions that further fulfilled the collective ideal of memorialization.

Like contemporary celebrations of women’s history, modern uses of memory focused on personal and collective identity as key to the development of a psychological self.<sup>395</sup> Postmodern memory contended a practice of memory as a collection of the social, cultural, collective, and/or public, which archived practices or artifacts for collective consumption.<sup>396</sup> As a result, memory became a separate field from history, a “historical agent” able to navigate across time and to address the constructed memories of any group.<sup>397</sup> Both women’s history and memory studies observe “a history beyond history,” a rhetorical strategy that effected a

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<sup>394</sup> Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History,” 1389.

<sup>395</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 134.

<sup>396</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 135-6.

<sup>397</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence,” 136.



certain explanation of history.<sup>398</sup> Memory, like women's history, became what Klein termed a "limit-event," in that it broke the traditional boundaries of historical discourse by offering empirical evidence that history cannot be normalized or universalized into an absolute narrative.<sup>399</sup> Memory and women's history expose history's patriarchal linguistic foundation. Even when memory and gender were "suppressed, denied, suffered a backlash or accusations of 'falseness' or 'political correctness,'" the discourses of memory and gender underwrote historical arguments and/or narratives.<sup>400</sup> The postmodern/poststructuralist nature of memory and gender studies signified history as a collective discourse, a "presence in the past."<sup>401</sup>

Susan Crane interpreted collective memory as a conceptualization of the continual presence of the past. Collective memory represented lived experience while historical memory preserved the lived experience through narrative. Crane argued that the professionalization of history created debates about the form and framework of both historical and collective memory.<sup>402</sup> As a result, historical consciousness of the past reflected the representation of history: as a recreation of the past or as a present experience of the past. Historiography produced a "sense of the past," while the professionalization of historians developed a reliance on the collective narrative as a means to posit an expansive history.<sup>403</sup> Crane suggested that by

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<sup>398</sup> The concept of metahistory is further discussed in Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 39.

<sup>399</sup> Klein, "On the Emergence," 140.

<sup>400</sup> Klein, "On the Emergence," 143.

<sup>401</sup> Klein, "On the Emergence," 145.

<sup>402</sup> Susan Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (Dec 1997): 1373.

<sup>403</sup> Crane, "Writing the Individual Back," 1374.

“relocating the collective back in the individual who articulates it,” histories of the individual are preserved in the larger collective memory.<sup>404</sup> The lived experience gets maintained and the collective historical consciousness reflected multiple voices.

Crane also claimed that Halbwachs left historians out of the framework of collective memory with his insistence that history reflected a singular narrative based on judgments of social norms and values. This would account for the extended absence of gender in traditional historical narratives. As Crane acknowledged, history often becomes an assimilation of remembered or archived knowledge that reflects who is validated as a witness to history. Voices of “others,” marked historically by gender, race, class, and other differences, experienced the silencing of their voices in the collective.<sup>405</sup> Here, Nora’s “sites of memory” offered opportunity; the archives, museums, memorials, anniversaries, and histories naturalized collective memory and created multiple sites of entry.<sup>406</sup> From Nora’s point of view, history “besieged memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it,” building false boundaries that manipulated the collective memory.<sup>407</sup> Crane favored the collective recognition of memory that allowed readers of history to know themselves as historical actors.<sup>408</sup> In terms of gender, this acknowledgment of historical agency created historical context: information and knowledge that could be useful as the foundation for further study, as well as encouragement for further actions. The celebration of National

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<sup>404</sup> Crane, “Writing the Individual Back,” 1375.

<sup>405</sup> Crane, “Writing the Individual Back,” 1378.

<sup>406</sup> Crane, “Writing the Individual Back,” 1379.

<sup>407</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 12.

<sup>408</sup> Crane, “Writing the Individual Back,” 1382.

Women's History Month and the NWHF's commemorative posters illustrate the inspirational value of recognition, allowing the public to view women as historical actors.

Like Crane, Patrick Hutton attributed the genesis of memory studies to the collective historical "mentalities" of the 1960s and 1970s. The expanding electronic culture made people more aware of the power of recollection and images. Hutton viewed memory as a historiographical problem for historians, as collective memory challenged established national identities.<sup>409</sup> Hutton contended that prior to 1980 historians used memory to recreate the past as it was imagined in the present, in a "fluid and uncomplicated" relationship.<sup>410</sup> Post-1990 historians of memory grew more skeptical of "distortions of memory," in which personal memories were transferred into history. The linguistic turn of the 1970s prompted a greater awareness of the construction of history; the role rhetoric and language played in establishing the power of certain historical narratives. Hutton cited Hayden White's metahistory study as instrumental in exposing archetypal narratives that shaped historical understanding.<sup>411</sup> Historiography was the tool to conceptualize totalizing narratives, as the choices included resulted in an often political history, "by moving from the nation to the globe, and by incorporating economic, social, and cultural history," into a select catalog of interests.<sup>412</sup> Largely absent from traditional historiographies, women's histories and scholars of women were neglected as an identity worthy of consideration in the larger historical tradition.

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<sup>409</sup> Patrick Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," *The History Teacher* 33 (Aug 2000): 534.

<sup>410</sup> Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," 535.

<sup>411</sup> Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," 535.

<sup>412</sup> Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," 536.

Hutton cited Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's 1983 text, *The Invention of Tradition*, as an influential study of how rituals and symbols influenced understanding of history.<sup>413</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger asserted that collective memory was constructed and instituted to influence political power. Like Halbwachs, Hobsbawm and Ranger recognized that public monuments and shrines place political power into the social context, giving the resulting collective memory stability through sustained commemoration.<sup>414</sup> In effect, commemoration equated to collective social norms and values.

### Conclusion

In 2004, Gerda Lerner reflected on her 1969 essay that defined a conceptual framework for women's history. Written before the establishment of women's history as an academic field, the 1969 essay set out several guidelines for the study of women in United States history. First, avoid generalizations about women as a universal entity at all costs; time, place, class, and race affected economic, political, and cultural status differently. Generalizations limited the scope of women's experiences. Second, the evidence of women's contributions to history needed to be recorded as part of the larger historical narrative. Women's activities needed to be valued in their own right, independent of androcentric interpretations. Third, women's history must reinterpret women's organizations, petitions, boycotts, letter-writing, and social pressure for reform as political action by women. This focused on the power of women as a group, rather than as individual members of an oppressed group. Next, research on women's

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<sup>413</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>414</sup> Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," 537.

exclusion from educational experiences needed to highlight the complexities of gender discrimination, as well as the complicated relationships of gender to race and social class. In addition, definitions of gender and the processes of gender socialization must prompt additional research about power structures and marginalization. Finally, the tension between genders and the resulting impact on equality needed to raise questions about the influence of culture, and culture's role in upholding political and economic inequality.<sup>415</sup> These goals would reshape the collective memory of women.

As Lerner noted, by 1970, the majority of the 24 texts on women's history published in the United States focused on the suffrage movement, considered the crowning achievement of early woman's rights activists.<sup>416</sup> By 1980, published manuscripts increased by 36, mostly authored by young authors influenced by the growing modern women's movement. Many of these texts focused on sexuality, reproduction, and women's struggles in the workplace. Women historians' primary investment in researching and writing history focused on developing a record of historical sources, rather than creating public displays of history. Progress in academia rewarded scholarship, not public engagement. Nevertheless, scholars benefitted from the educators and organizations that advanced history by sharing with students and the public. Women's organization benefitted from the research and archival skills of scholars who recorded women's history. Legislators benefitted by having access to data and records and lived experiences. The public benefitted, as well, receiving a more complex narrative of history.

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<sup>415</sup> Gerda Lerner, "U.S. Women's History: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Women's History* (Winter 2004): 11.

<sup>416</sup> Lerner, "U.S. Women's History," 10.

## CHAPTER VII

### WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AS COMMEMORATION

*Unfortunately, it is still necessary to have a token month devoted to women's lives. Every generation of little girls and women need to learn their past so that they can imagine a future in which gender equality is the norm and not the exception.*<sup>417</sup>

Asked her views on the commemoration of Women's History Month in 2014, historian Ruth Rosen favored the event as "a yearly reminder that half the population exists."<sup>418</sup> Historians Kathleen Franz and Kate Haulman stated that Women's History Month challenged ideas about the category of "woman" and the determinations of historical value given to material culture.<sup>419</sup> Author of historical fiction, Nancy Goldstone was direct in her disapproval, stating, "Women's History Month was a first step towards remedying inequality, but the reliance on the commemoration now gives cover to conservative academics who think that female influence on history is over-rated. So there's no need for incorporation of figures covered in separate subject classes."<sup>420</sup> More succinctly, Goldstone added, "What looks like inclusion is actually exclusion."

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<sup>417</sup> Ruth Rosen, "US: Why Women's History Month?" *OpenDemocracy*, March 7, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/us-why-womens-history-month/>.

<sup>418</sup> Ruth Rosen, "US: Why Women's History Month?" *OpenDemocracy*, March 7, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/us-why-womens-history-month/>.

<sup>419</sup> Kathleen Franz and Kate Haulman, "Five Myths about Women's History Month," *Ms. Magazine*, March 31, 2020, <https://msmagazine.com/2020/03/31/five-myths-about-womens-history-month/>.

<sup>420</sup> Nancy Goldstone, "I'm a Historian, and I Think Women's History Month Is a Mistake," *Time Magazine*, March 23, 2018, <https://time.com/5209670/historian-against-womens-history-month/>.

By the late 1980s, women's historians began to employ a feminist methodology and strategy of discursive analysis to understand how women kept disappearing as subjects in history.<sup>421</sup> Themes of women's history focused on three theoretical areas: viewing women as agents of history by complicating the binary of public/private; understanding difference through identity politics; and, interrogating the history of sexuality, through the politics of social movements and identity politics. Feminist theory gave voice to the marginalized, those whose identities had been transitioned, silenced, absent, and/or limited. Feminist theory also pinpointed the in/between spaces of the self: the intersections of identity contextualized through underlying constructions of gender, race, socioeconomic class, sexuality and other cultural differences.

### Using Feminist Theory to Transform History

In the late 1990s, historian Judith Bennett challenged women's history to strengthen its bonds with feminism.<sup>422</sup> Identifying herself as a radical lesbian feminist and a medieval historian, Bennett observed that women's history was becoming increasingly excluded from mainstream feminist sources. Bennett offered several examples to support her argument: *Ms.* magazine no longer featured a monthly column on women's history; *Sign: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* discontinued its "Archives" section that featured primary historical sources; most of the women highlighted on the posters produced by the National Women's History Project (NWHP) were contemporary honorees rather than commemorations of women

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<sup>421</sup> Anne Firor Scott, Sara Evans, Susan Cahn, and Elizabeth Faue "Women's History in the Millennium: A Conversation across Three "Generations": Part I," *Journal of Women's History* (Spring 1999), 24.

<sup>422</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2.

from different eras.<sup>423</sup> By the early 2000s, feminist journals had expanded in size, but continued to publish little women's history outside of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Likewise, the Berkshire Conferences grew, while offering fewer panels on women's medieval history.<sup>424</sup> Bennett acknowledged that since World War II, the twentieth century had become the primary focus of history. Bennett argued this shift to presentism reflected the increasing influence of poststructuralist theories that dismantled the past grand narratives of history.<sup>425</sup>

This privileging of contemporary history over ancient history also reflected the expansion of feminist scholarship of other academic disciplines. Social sciences and feminist literary criticism considered feminist scholarship to be "cutting edge."<sup>426</sup> Women's history, "once the queen of feminist scholarship," lost its panache in the Women's Studies classroom, largely considered an out-dated form of scholarship.<sup>427</sup> Bennett attributed this largely to the challenges of handling multiple differences; every historical subject reflected multiple historical resonances, which created a complex narrative to understand and demonstrate.<sup>428</sup> To go too far back into history risked reference to androcentric narratives preferably forgotten. As a result, feminist scholarship focused on themes that addressed contemporary issues.

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<sup>423</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 31.

<sup>424</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 32.

<sup>425</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 38.

<sup>426</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 39. I would add media studies to Bennett's claim. I am reminded of a graduate symposium I attended at Ohio State University in 2010, led by bell hooks. To illustrate hooks' annoyance at the lack of historical background included in Women's Studies as a discipline, she asked all of the students present in the room to state their research projects. Out of 34 students, I was the only one working on a historically based study (of textbooks). hooks' "atta-girl" remains a highlight of my graduate study.

<sup>427</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 39.

<sup>428</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 41-2.



Asserting that women's historians needed to recommit to using history's chronological evaluation to support feminist theory, Bennett cited Charlotte Bunch's four-stage process: (1) describe what exists, (2) analysis of why it exists, (3) vision of what should exist, and (4) strategy of how to achieve the vision.<sup>429</sup> Through chronological evaluation, history acted as a comparative. More importantly, history became an extensive archive of knowledge. By viewing contemporary subjects through the lens of the distant past, the historian utilized a new historical perspective that resulted in a more concise understanding of theoretical analysis.<sup>430</sup>

Recognizing that "theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary, it fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end," theory must be claimed as "necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism."<sup>431</sup> Then, theory becomes shared, transformative, integrated into practice. The practice of theory allows an analysis of cause and effect, of memory, and of events. Theory articulates the relationship between the individual and the social, constructing intersections of history with culturally assigned differences, and offering a mode through which to apply the constructs to multiple identities.

A poststructural analysis of history produced a reflective knowledge of social institutions and cultural experience. The politics of deconstruction influenced an expanded consciousness of the mechanisms of power. As a result, the historian reinterpreted the world while also revising the historical narrative. As Scott noted, "The story is no longer about the things that

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<sup>429</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 49, referencing Charlotte Bunch, "Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education" in *Learning Our Way: Essays in Feminist Education*, eds. Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Pollack (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983): 248-60.

<sup>430</sup> Bennett, *History Matters*, 52.

<sup>431</sup> bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Law School* (1991), 2 and 8.

have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them; instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed.”<sup>432</sup> Scott called for “textuality,” in order to blur identifying boundaries of categorization.<sup>433</sup> Scott shifted the analysis away from the body, focusing instead on institutional ideologies of difference. By noting that “class” defines more than community and workplace, “gender” acts as more than a social, cultural, or biological difference, and “race” marks an institutionalized political distinction, the textualities of difference challenge both what is represented and what is not. The significance of the resulting text shifted the structuring of the historical identity. Women’s history created a contextualized history. However, this history remained grounded in the experience of being a woman. Rather than a simple ‘who’ defined in opposition to the norm of “what,” textuality included the when, where, why and how – the and+also, rather than the either/or binary definition. The historical narrative expanded to include a diversity of voices and experiences as agents and actors of history.

For Scott, the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach to history offered the feminist historian the means to critically assess the formation of differentiation, or, how women become historical subjects. As Scott warned, “More than in many other areas of historical inquiry, women’s history is characterized by extraordinary tensions: between practical politics and academic scholarship; between received disciplinary standards and interdisciplinary influences; between history’s atheoretical stance and feminism’s need for theory.”<sup>434</sup> Scott argued that through its categorization practices, and operating as a cultural institution, the discipline of

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<sup>432</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>433</sup> Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 7.

<sup>434</sup> Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 17.

History “produces (rather than gathers or reflects) knowledge about the past generally, and, inevitably, about sexual difference as well.”<sup>435</sup> Scott contended that examining the development and contexts of categories would expose cultural, political, and historical productions of identification. Scott observed the categories of history, women, men, difference, equality, the terms of political theory itself as relational examples, arguing, “We cannot write women into history, for example, unless we are willing to entertain the notion that history as a unified story was a fiction about a universal subject whose universality was achieved through implicit processes of differentiation, marginalization, and exclusion.”<sup>436</sup> Some historians may take exception to Scott’s statement, relying on a traditional construction of history as an objective record of facts. Objectivity may be practical and reflect disciplinary standards of factual accuracy, but historical reality remains subject to political, economic, and social influences. A historian’s narrative reflects personal influences and academic training. Categorization of history results from this.

The celebration of Women’s History Month, as a once-a-year notation of women’s history, illustrates Scott’s argument of the marginalization and exclusion that result from categorization. Women’s History Month becomes a cultural practice that reinforces the difference and unequal status of women, even as it celebrates the experiences of women. The celebration of Women’s History Month underscores the problems faced by historians when writing women’s history: how to make women the agent, actor, and subject of history, without recreating an androcentric perspective. The universal narrative of Man remained the

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<sup>435</sup> Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 9.

<sup>436</sup> Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 196.

centerpiece of history because “man” continued to determine “truth” and agency.<sup>437</sup> Demands for equality only reinforced difference; the focus on agency and subjectivity also structured the objectification and subordination of the other.

### Commemoration of Women’s History Month as Ritual and Symbol

Celebrated annually, Women’s History Month relies heavily on ritual and symbol, to build a collective memory of women’s history and to wield political power. This political power also affects Congressional negotiations to establish a National Women’s History Museum on the Washington D.C. mall, as part of the Smithsonian Institution. Legislation first introduced in 1998 by New York Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney finally made its way to a full House vote in February, 2020. A bipartisan 374-37 vote moved the legislation to the Senate, where it awaited then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s call for a vote, followed by presidential approval. The significance a women’s history museum as a national and political symbol has fueled Maloney’s continued advocacy of the necessary legislation. As Maloney noted on the House floor before the vote, “The journey of this moment started for me with a walk around the National Mall. I was looking at all the museums, and I saw them dedicated to air, space, spies, law enforcement, textiles, the postal service, arts. All enriching institutions. But I found myself asking, ‘Where are the women?’”<sup>438</sup>

Commemorative projects like Women’s History Month and Black History Month create specific historical knowledge. Historical narratives frequently rely on this knowledge.

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<sup>437</sup> Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 197.

<sup>438</sup> Christina Marcos, “House Passes Bipartisan Bill to Create Women’s History Museum,” *The Hill*, February 11, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/482594-house-passes-bipartisan-bill-to-create-womens-history-museum>.

Commemoration requires universal characteristics that maintain a logical chronology and repeat easily understood “facts” of social, cultural, and material practices. These collective memories become the basis of public tributes or memorials. As these tributes and memorials respond to cultural shifts of awareness, through additional knowledge or occlusion of information, different and sometimes opposing memories advance. After all, those who produce memory dictate the attached knowledge, while those who consume memory interpret its meaning.

As collective memories respond to cultural shifts of awareness through additions or occlusions to public memorials, different and sometimes opposing memories advance. In referencing the use of collective memory in African American emancipation celebrations, Mitch Kachun asserted, “if the predominant interpretations we encounter and absorb provide a context for our lives that is unflattering or untenable, we must resign ourselves to accept the unacceptable or else go about constructing a past that has validity and provides meaning and a tolerable framework for our lives.”<sup>439</sup> Historical investigation of African Americans led to studies of other racialized groups, as well as giving strength to women’s histories by drawing parallels. As a result, challenges to the validity of the historical tradition dismantled, examined, revised, and expanded the collective memory of history. Collective memory grew to contain this new knowledge. Increasingly public commemorations celebrated the resulting statements of collective identity and history, on an individual level, a cultural level, and a national level.<sup>440</sup> As Kachun acknowledged, the development of a broader historical consciousness supported the

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<sup>439</sup> Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>440</sup> Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 13.

genesis of a more inclusive historiographical tradition and an expanded understanding of the dissemination of knowledge.<sup>441</sup>

Recognizing the need to expand knowledge of African American history, Carter G. Woodson proposed the idea for Black History Month in his 1912 doctoral thesis. Woodson argued that inclusion of Black History in curriculums was imperative for social change, declaring, “If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.”<sup>442</sup> Because of Woodson’s efforts, Black History Month has been celebrated nationally since 1976. While I have yet to find a direct acknowledgement of Black History Month as an inspiration for Women’s History Month, undoubtedly this is the case. Early Women’s History Month activists would have been aware of the implementation of Black History Month. Like Women’s History activists, advocates for Black History Month viewed the annual commemoration as a celebratory recognition and a means to expand social relationships.

Notably, detractors cited the dangers of “pigeon-holing” black history into established narratives.<sup>443</sup> As in Women’s History, commemorations of black historical figures largely focused on the same key actors prominent in the Civil Rights Movement: Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., with the addition of various sports figures. Social justice advocate Raquel Willis noted, “It was as if black history stopped once Dr. King died.”<sup>444</sup> Community organizers (Fannie

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<sup>441</sup> Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 14.

<sup>442</sup> Melinda D. Anderson, “Black History Month in Schools - Retire or Reboot?” *The Atlantic*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/black-history-monthretire-or-reboot/470124/>.

<sup>443</sup> Anderson, “Black History Month,” 2.

<sup>444</sup> Anderson, “Black History Month,” 3.

Lou Hamer, Marsha P. Johnson, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman) and writers (Phillis Wheatley, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston) became popularized as political or literary note worthies, rather than historical leaders/figures.

### Commemoration Influence on Education

A 2014 study conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) on civil rights education in K-12 schools found an absence of core historical information. The SPLC study found all fifty states plus the District of Columbia “woefully inadequate” in inclusion of civil rights content in history and social studies classes. Twenty states received failing grades. Five states - Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Oregon, and Wyoming - did not provide any teaching resources or include civil rights history in their state teaching standards. Only Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina received an “A” grade for state standards and teaching resources.<sup>445</sup> In the Foreword to the study, historian and Chairman Emeritus of the NAACP Julian Bond acknowledged historical literacy as instrumental in maintaining racism, as “Animosity exists when people are not taught to understand and know each other.”<sup>446</sup>

The 2014 evaluation, based on a 2011 essential-content rubric (Appendix B: Methodology) tracked desired improvements and considered additional state education documents and resources (including funding). Document examination focused on basic

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<sup>445</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Civil Rights Movement Education Remains ‘Woefully Inadequate’ in a Majority of States, SPLC Report Finds, *Southern Poverty Law Center* website, March 5, 2019. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2014/03/05/civil-rights-movement-education-remains-%E2%80%98woefully-inadequate%E2%80%99-majority-states-splc-report>. Note: Michigan received a grade of “F,” meeting only 15% of a measurement scale based on inclusion of references and teaching resources in key education areas.

<sup>446</sup> Julian Bond, “Teaching the Movement, 2014: Foreword,” *Teaching Tolerance* website, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/teaching-the-movement-2014/foreward>.

knowledge or major events and figures, sequencing of information in connection to other historical narratives, progression of information through various grade levels, and the depth of coverage at three different levels: causes of the Civil Rights Movement, resistance to the movement, and conflicts within the movement. Studying civil rights as a movement emphasized the connections to students lived experiences: through citizenship, current events, and other social movements. Teaching the Movement argued that through these criteria, the Civil Rights Movement becomes more than a footnote of “struggle,” but the building narrative of political, economic, and cultural change.<sup>447</sup> The accessibility of resources also received a grade, using the following benchmarks: Did states make teaching resources available online? Were resources organized by grade or topic? Were resources easy to implement?<sup>448</sup>

The conclusion of the SPLC report illustrated the varying commitment to adequately portraying the Civil Rights Movement as an important historical event. Using declarations on state requirements as a guideline, the educational goals of different (frequently failing) states become clear. For example, Idaho’s state mandate on teaching the civil rights movement: “Analyze the struggles for the extension of civil rights.” Iowa: “In groups students research the actions of the civil rights movement of the ’50s and ’60s. The students identify how the actions of participants and groups in the civil rights movement impacted the lives of the individual and changed group decision-making.” Maine: “Demonstrate an understanding of the causes and effects of major events in United States history and their connection to both Maine and world

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<sup>447</sup> Teaching the Movement: Our Approach, *Teaching Tolerance* website, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/teaching-the-movement-2014/our-approach>.

<sup>448</sup> Teaching the Movement: Content in the Major Documents, *Teaching Tolerance* website, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/teaching-the-movement-2014/content-in-the-major-documents>.



history with emphasis on events after 1877, including, but not limited to: industrialization, the Great Depression, the Cold War (and its ending), World War I and World War II, the Vietnam era, civil rights movement, Watergate.”<sup>449</sup> The ambiguity of these guidelines offers little structure to guide educators to reach concrete and/or uniform educational goals. Teachers with an extensive background in history may be able to devise a thorough curriculum. However, overworked, under-trained instructors are at a disadvantage, even if the intent is to be inclusive and thorough. State funding limits for professional development, school system resources, and systemic racism further complicate the inclusion of valuable material. Woodson’s concerns about the minimization of Black History prove predictive.

The SPLC study results mirror the challenges faced by Women’s History, including cultural conflicts, political controversies, and economic inequalities. Rather than topics of education, commemorations fill the void. Somewhat.<sup>450</sup> Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford expanded on Kachun’s question of the uses of memory in their edited collection on the Civil Rights Movement, noting that the effectiveness of historical memories often reflects the terms of its use. For example, memory of the Civil Rights Movement frequently does not focus on the resources or laws that result from the movement, but instead address general remembrances of the movement.<sup>451</sup> Romano and Raiford reference current debates over content in high school history courses and textbooks as evidence. Scholarly works described events, but focus

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<sup>449</sup> Teaching the Movement: Conclusions, Teaching Tolerance website, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/teaching-the-movement-2014/conclusions>.

<sup>450</sup> I also find it interesting that the “women’s movement” is labeled as something separate from the Civil Rights Movement, though the experiences are so similar. A topic for another paper...

<sup>451</sup> Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), xii.

on dominant narratives only. The goals, practices, legacies, victories and defeats remain mysteries, largely unexplored.<sup>452</sup>

Recent debate over Texas social science curriculum further highlights terminal use of memory in setting educational standards. The Texas curriculum standards, first set in 1997 by a publicly elected fifteen-member State Board of Education (SBOE), representing each state school district, reviews and adopts textbooks for the Texas school system. Given the purchasing power of Texas, textbook publishing companies adjust content and language in accordance with established Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The SBOE also regularly revises educational standards for the classroom, using input from scholars, educators, and citizens, as well as political parties. However, few SBOE members have training in education.

In 2010, proposed amendments to the curriculum made national news. Republican members of the SBOE, holding an overwhelming 10-5 majority, submitted hundreds of changes to the state standards. These proposed changes reflected personal beliefs and political interests rather than historical scholarship. The new standards celebrated the benefits of free enterprise, removed all references to Native Americans, recognized economics and states' rights as justifications for slavery, footnoted Jim Crow and the Black Codes, and downplayed the separation of church and state to a constitutional suggestion.<sup>453</sup>

The educational ramifications of the new standards swiftly exposed instructional challenges. A 2011 review of the Texas standards by the conservative Thomas B. Fordham

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<sup>452</sup> Romano and Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement*, xiv.

<sup>453</sup> Kritika Agarwal, "Texas Revises History Education, Again," *Perspectives on History*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2019/texas-revises-history-education-again-how-a-good-faith-process-became-political>.

Institute recognized the “political distortion of history.”<sup>454</sup> Teachers struggled to comprehensively cover all of the assigned material in the little time allotted, necessitating a focus on training students to recognize information included in standardized tests. In order to pass on to the next grade level, only homogenous content was taught, with little regard for historical context or veracity.<sup>455</sup>

In 2018, responding to criticism, standards streamlined, adjusted to cover tested material. Evaluated on a point system that reflected an “individual’s impact and sphere of influence, and whether the figure represented a diverse perspective or culture,” historical figures were deleted from required instructional time.<sup>456</sup> Helen Keller, Hillary Clinton, the World War II Women Air Force pilots, Navaho Code Talkers, Billy Graham, and Barry Goldwater were all eliminated.

Resulting public debates about the politicization of history highlight the frequently controversial relationships influencing memory and history. Women’s History Month activists and historians of women routinely battled accusations of politicizing history. Educational standards in textbooks and curriculum prompt similar questions. A 2016 Social Science Research Council report acknowledged disagreement over K-12 standard goals, content, and narratives, while finding college history instruction focused on “habits of mind of historical thinking.”<sup>457</sup> In other words, memory.

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<sup>454</sup> Agarwal, “Texas Revises History,” 3.

<sup>455</sup> Agarwal, “Texas Revises History,” 4.

<sup>456</sup> Agarwal, “Texas Revises History,” 5.

<sup>457</sup> Lendal Calder and Tracy Steffes, “Measuring College Learning in History,” *Social Science Research Council*, May 2016, [highereds.ssrc.org/wp-content/uploads/MCL-in-History.pdf](https://highereds.ssrc.org/wp-content/uploads/MCL-in-History.pdf).

## The Practical Challenges of Historical Memory

Even when memory is an “ambivalent dialogue,” as cited by Julie Stephens, memory is recorded, its impact on history is felt. For Stephens, who uses memory studies and oral history as interpretative methodologies, collective memory is deeply affected by cultural interest in the memory of an event, as well as the emotion attached to the event. Using second-wave feminism in Australia as her example, Stephens suggests using memory studies and oral history to re-examine established narratives, looking for additional relationships and context. Stephens is looking for both narrative connections and resistances to representational feminist frameworks. By breaking down what Stephens refers to as “binary logic,” that “tally-up the successes and failures,” the historical narrative of gender does not have to create a singular, dominant version of the story.<sup>458</sup> Like Nora, Stephens is comfortable in the messiness of both individual and collective memories. Viewing memory as a phenomenon of the “eternal present,” Nora placed history as a representation of the past, the realm of analysis and criticism. While memory “is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual,” history belongs to all, and claims “universal authority.”<sup>459</sup> Narratives result from the production of representations asserted by this universal authority, which then result in cultural, political, economic, and ideological interpretations by the consumers of memory. In addition, Stephens claims that the emotion tied to memory, and to its telling, is a significant element of the narrative because the memory links the rememberer to the story and influences

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<sup>458</sup> Julie Stephens, “Our Remembered Selves: Oral History and Feminist Memory,” *Oral History* 38 (2010): 85.

<sup>459</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 8-9.

its telling. “The seeking of composure” or the drive to portray a reasoned narrative, also exposes the unresolved issues, which for the historian may open additional avenues of memory to explore.<sup>460</sup>

While some might condemn the trajectory of memory studies to an accusation of revisionist history, the inclusion of memory through oral history reflects contemporary scholarly influences. Stephens cites the cultural and linguistic turn in memory theory and in historical practice as a “cultural determinism” that favored the development of oral history as a viable historical practice.<sup>461</sup> Stephens argued that oral history interviews are guided by cultural scripts. The script develops through the questions that are asked repeatedly and are informed by the collective memory of the subject. Kathryn L. Nasstrom focuses on this, as well. Using the history of the 1946 increase in black voters in Atlanta, Nasstrom illustrates her theory that scholarly redefinitions of leadership are necessary for the recovery of a political past.<sup>462</sup> Claiming that history acts as a record of outcomes, rather than a record of process, Nasstrom illustrated how Atlanta’s black male leaders come to define the history of the voters’ rights movement. By gaining media attention, the public focus centers on the leadership of the organization rather than on the women who rallied support through grassroots efforts of citizenship education and voter registration drives. Local media concentrates attention on the leadership and the resulting elected officials, as the public faces of the movement. Success makes the election event noteworthy. Scholars then use the media and the organization

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<sup>460</sup> Stephens, “Our Remembered Selves,” 82.

<sup>461</sup> Stephens, “Our Remembered Selves,” 88.

<sup>462</sup> Kathryn L. Nasstrom, “Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women’s Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia,” *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, eds. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 255.

leaders as resources to document and analyze the events, the organization, and the movement. White officials then appropriate the success as a symbol of black advancement. The narrative script that develops enters the collective memory. Evidence of women's roles as organizers is limited to press releases, photos, and organizational materials, few of which incorporate into the immediate historical record, as they do not fit the collective memory. Even if recognized as valued community leaders, women's role in the success of voting black politicians into office remains minimized.<sup>463</sup>

Noting that the goal of including women in the historical record is not "to overthrow the existing narrative so much as to reintroduce women to it and thereby change it," Nasstrom's model of outcomes over process does emphasize the importance of the collective memory.<sup>464</sup> Women's leadership is as recognized as men's are. However, by stressing the marginalization of women on a cultural level rather than an expression of the gender binary, the focus remains on commemorative opportunity rather than the development of a comprehensive narrative.

Opportunity, as a reflection of advantageous chance and favorable conditions, can institute long-lasting shifts in collective memory. No example of this is more valuable than the rewriting of Civil War history by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. As historian Karen L. Cox noted in *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*, the installation of monuments and flags in public spaces became

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<sup>463</sup> Nasstrom, "Down to Now," 254. Deep and collective thanks is owed to the political activism of Stacey Abrams (New Georgia Project), LaTosha Brown (Black Voters Matter), Nikema Williams (Georgia Democratic Party), Jessica Byrd (Movement for Black Lives), and countless others in "turning Georgia blue," in the 2020 election.

<sup>464</sup> Nasstrom, "Down to Now," 280.

tangible symbols of Confederate pride, even after defeat.<sup>465</sup> The production of textbooks and archives furthered this message of cultural superiority. Founded in 1865, the Ladies Memorial Association (LMA) focused on gravesite memorials immediately after the Civil War. By 1890, groups reorganized into the Daughters of the Confederacy (1890-1894), organizing groups of wealthy white southern women in the preservation of Civil War era artifacts and sustaining cemetery memorials. The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) founded in 1894, focused on the building of public monuments, continued care for veterans and widows, and the publishing and promotion of textbooks. UDC also formed Children of the Confederacy groups, so that heirs would be exposed to and continue the traditions of the confederacy. UDC's actions established a pro Confederate history, a collective memory that privileged whiteness, defended states' rights, prescribed traditional roles for women, and painted the plantation system as beneficial and considerate land stewardship.<sup>466</sup>

UDC sustained a primary goal: vindication of Confederate ideals by re-establishing "historical truth."<sup>467</sup> At the local level, UDC members installed thousands of monuments to confederate war heroes throughout the south. Extensive and lucrative fundraising campaigns resulted in state and regional monuments placed in public spaces.<sup>468</sup> Monuments and flags became the centerpiece of defining Confederate pride, and established UDC as the leading authority on confederate culture. Cox recounted Adelia Dunovant's, 1902 address to a national

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<sup>465</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 6.

<sup>466</sup> Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 5.

<sup>467</sup> Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 6.

<sup>468</sup> Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 52.

meeting. Speaking as the president of a Texas UDC chapter, Dunovant warned, “History should be made to serve its true purpose by bringing its lessons into the present and using them as a guide to the future.”<sup>469</sup> UDC members took Dunovant’s message to heart, rallying to preserve “loyalty to memories,” as well as “loyalty to principles.”<sup>470</sup>

The establishment of archives and the writing and publication of textbooks became the means to promote “true” confederate history, to “instruct and instill into the descendants of the people of the South” guiding principles and a pro-Southern perspective of history.<sup>471</sup> UDC members established archives to maintain documents, material culture, and oral histories. Members wrote history based on these sources for local newspapers and regional magazines.<sup>472</sup> Cox noted, “History was highly regarded as a powerful tool of persuasion.”<sup>473</sup> By “correcting” biased Northern narratives of the Civil War and its aftermath, UDC members promoted interpretations that vindicated Confederate men and culture.<sup>474</sup> Cox also acknowledged the amateur historian status of most UDC members, notable in a period when women were largely excluded from the history profession. UDC meetings regularly included historical discussions. These deliberations then became lesson plans shared with children, whose education “began at mother’s knee.”<sup>475</sup> For over a decade, UDC’s Committee on History

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<sup>469</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 93.

<sup>470</sup> Cox. *Dixie’s Daughters*, 93.

<sup>471</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 95.

<sup>472</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 95.

<sup>473</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 96.

<sup>474</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 97.

<sup>475</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 101.



developed and promoted the key topics of study for all members. “Confederate culture” was born on this foundation.<sup>476</sup> Memorialization of Confederate culture focused on a single goal, as proclaimed by member Elizabeth Lumpkin Glenn: “Teach a child well and let him feel that he owes a debt to the men who fought by his father’s side, to the women who suffered as his mother suffered, and he will pay that debt.”<sup>477</sup>

## Conclusion

Since history and memory are not static archives, definitive limitations defy application. Communal context invests meaning into the collective memory. Had women always been included in historical narratives, documentation would have called attention to the relationships of the past, the present, and the future. Leadership would have been viewed in the context of shared social and political struggle, and as a reframing of the evolving gender dynamic. Women’s stories could have been valued as much as those of men, as expressions of heroism and as challenges to dominant historical narratives. At risk would have been singular narratives about men’s leadership positions and the collective memory of electoral success.<sup>478</sup>

In his examination of memory surrounding the Holocaust, Michael Rothberg questioned the institutionalization of collective memories, in particular what happens when different social groups with histories of victimization confront each other in narratives of the public sphere. Rothberg posited that these histories always calculated a relevance to national history, as a

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<sup>476</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 102.

<sup>477</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 123. Glenn included this statement in her November 1906 speech, “The Land of Our Desire,” to women at the Montecagle UDC Assembly.

<sup>478</sup> Nasstrom, “Down to Now,” 275.

“multidirectional” history.<sup>479</sup> This multidirectional history shared a history of a common memory: one that “aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually.”<sup>480</sup> As a result, the collective memory becomes the “sum total” of the experiences that are communicated. Citing Confino and Peter Fritzsche’s argument that memory was a set of practices and interventions based on past symbolic representations that inform social actions, Rothberg acknowledged memory as both a contemporary phenomenon and a past process.<sup>481</sup> For Rothberg, memory and identity are uneasy compatriots, as the “boundaries of memory parallel the boundaries of group identities.”<sup>482</sup> A multidirectional memory then becomes essentially the product of an intersectional identity, a common memory for the sub-group that requires communication and integration into the larger collective memory. While a hegemonic collective memory of a national identity refuses to dismantle the privilege on which it survives, collective memories grounded in concerns of gender, race, class, and other differences frame questions that challenge recognition and representation of collective memories, fracturing the foundations of memory on which history can thrive.

In a blog post on teaching history, historian Trevor Getz acknowledged the current crisis in college and university history programs. Fewer students plus increased administrative oversight leads to declining interest in the study of history. Getz argued that a cultural focus on

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<sup>479</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multinational Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>480</sup> Rothberg, *Multinational Memory*, 15.

<sup>481</sup> Rothberg, *Multinational Memory*, 4.

<sup>482</sup> Rothberg, *Multinational Memory*, 5.

STEM programs, as well in changes in student demographics and skills might also be contributing causes. Alternatively, by maintaining a focus on traditional Euro-centered, patriarchal narratives, historians may have failed to convey why the study of history is valuable.<sup>483</sup> In tracking US population changes, the Pew Research Center concluded by 2055 no single racial majority will exist. Immigrants, primarily from Asia and Latin America (including Mexico) will comprise the largest population growth. Millennials (born after 1980) are racially diverse and educated. Women have become the primary economic providers for 40% of all families. The middle class is shrinking, while the economic divide between wealth and poverty grows. Religious affiliations are also in decline. As a result, many of the standard narratives favored in traditional history classes no longer reflect contemporary plots. The common progress narrative no longer applies.<sup>484</sup>

Several education groups have been established to develop new pedagogical approaches. The largest and best funded, Stanford History Education Group, offers teaching resources on various topics, from lesson plans to digital resources to conferences. Periods and subjects divide topics. Contemporary topics appear to be representative of gender, race, socioeconomic class, and sexuality, but do follow traditional values of importance (war, economics, land expansion, and business). Only a few topics address women's history directly: suffrage and anti-suffrage, settlement houses, migrant mother photography, women of the 1950s, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Pocahontas is featured, as told through the lens of John Smith. Some topics do use photographs and reference women's roles in civil rights and

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<sup>483</sup> Trevor Getz, "How to teach history better" - Oxford University Press's blog on *Academic Insights for the Thinking World*, accessed January 21, 2020, <http://blog.oup.com/2020/02/how-to-teach-history-better/>.

<sup>484</sup> D'Vera Cohn and Andrea Caumont, "10 demographic trends that are shaping the U.S. and the world," *Pew Research Center, Fact Tank: News in the Numbers* (blog), March 31, 2016.

protest movements.<sup>485</sup> Washington State University's "Roots of Contemporary Issues" courses combine the study of current social problems with history. Emphasis is placed on building critical thinking skills.<sup>486</sup> History Gateways, an American Historical Association program, accentuates the globalization of US History survey courses, providing teaching material and resources to community college instructors.<sup>487</sup> While helpful, these sources do not provide follow-up information on implementation of material or long-term effect of curriculum changes.

To shape a culture of memory that incorporates women, memorialization needs to be complex: honor the individual experience and its connection to the wider culture, in all of its multiplicities. In doing so, the culture of memory also proliferates. This contextualization must become an integral part of the professionalization of history. Historiographies, research, pedagogy all need to articulate the connections between gender, memory, history, and the social environment. Museums, archives, memorials, commemorations, and the media need to feature multiple "sites of memory," dispelling any artificial boundaries. Integrated awareness of gender can expand the traditional frameworks of memory and history to reflect the full contexts of culture, which also multiplies collective memories. While tradition and ritual play a role in memory by helping to remember, the cultural influence on memory is equally important. The emotional connections to historical narratives sustain investment in collective memories

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<sup>485</sup> Stanford History Education Group, "History Lessons," accessed January 21, 2020, <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons?f%5B0%5D=topic%3A8&page=11#main-content#main-content#main-content>.

<sup>486</sup> Washington State University, "Welcome to the Roots of Contemporary Issues," accessed January 21, 2020, <https://history.wsu.edu/rci/>.

<sup>487</sup> American Historical Association, "History Gateways," accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.historians.org/historygateways>.

that support specific narratives. Based on universal, “common beliefs,” collective memories often deflect critical analysis, influenced by popular culture as much as by educational curriculums.

History often seems firmly entrenched as a methodology over-reliant on hierarchy. Yet, dynamics of power present in historical narratives are useful means to interrogate the intersections of gender, history, and memory. Historical narratives develop through verifiable processes. Memory studies, like women’s history, have a non-linear nature, capable of challenging that structure of norms, conventions, and common practices. Working as a stand-alone methodology or in concert with women’s history or gender studies, memory becomes a way to question the danger of telling a single historical story. By placing women’s distinct ways of remembering into the historical narrative, women participate politically and share in shaping a more complex, and gendered, understanding of how collective memory operates.

## CONCLUSION

A July 22, 1976 Women's Action Alliance memo offered a challenging critique of its proposed National Women's Agenda and the upcoming "Beyond Suffrage" conference. The unnamed author pointed out the weaknesses in the coalition structure that influenced the success of the conference (and presumably, the larger coalition). The memo claimed that as the moderator and resource clearinghouse, WAA retained responsibility for progress of the overall movement. While the conference goals set out to build consensus amongst different organization representatives, some individuals expressed frustration at the slow pace of direct action on issues. Listing goals, while a necessary tool, did not fulfill the desire for direct political action or the acquisition of funding for stated issues.<sup>488</sup> As a result, coalition members lacked a sense of "ownership" over Alliance goals. The un-named author of the memo encouraged WAA to transfer the Alliance agenda to the members, to give organizations public credit for participation, and to use the national press to further public awareness of the efforts made by organizations on behalf of the National Women's Agenda. As evidence, the memo author noted the limited success of Women's Agenda Day (December 2, 1975). While WAA used the event to publicize coalition goals, it did not result in substantially more involvement from organizations or legislative change.

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<sup>488</sup> Janis Kelly, "Women's Agenda," newsletter, 4, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Coalitions: National Women's Agenda Project: Administration; Structure and Planning, Consultation Correspondence and report, 1976, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

In response to the critique and cognizant of the necessity to involve the expertise of special interests, WAA set up task force groups, with the intention of expanding coalition between well-informed organization leaders. To achieve educational equity, advance employment opportunities, and ensure health care, organizations had to utilize the power of coalitions. However, instead of attending meetings, organization leaders often sent administrative staff instead. While these administrators represented their organizations, they frequently did not understand either the universal nature of issues WAA hoped to address or have the expertise or authority necessary to put plans into action.<sup>489</sup>

This highlighted the memo author's evaluation that questioned the ability of organizations to strategize for long-term effectiveness, noting, "By and large, women's organizations in this country had not viewed their issues from a woman's perspective before. They had, after all, been historically formed in order to give women a voice on fundamental social issues. But they had not been created and were only now beginning to understand their self-interest and self-relationship to these issues as women."<sup>490</sup> This astute analysis emphasized the over-reliance on the development of procedures as reflections of "action." Organization strategies routinely remained limited to an individual leader's ability to respond to calls for alliance, in respect to specific organization goals *and* in support of the greater good. If a leader neglected to act, because of the overwhelmingly patriarchal hierarchy of organizations, no one did. This inexperience with viewing themselves as "policy-makers or implementers, not as people with power," showed a crippling lack of understanding of power dynamics that

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<sup>489</sup> Unnamed memo, Women's Action Alliance Records 1970-1996: Series II. Projects: Coalitions: National Women's Agenda Project: Administration; Structure and Planning, Consultation Correspondence and report, 1976, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College: Northampton, MA.

<sup>490</sup> WAA records, unnamed memo, 3.

minimized any potential gains.<sup>491</sup> Likewise, while WAA's emphasis on data collection provided valuable information to the policy-makers of member organizations, the overabundance of evidence required minimal follow-up of critical analysis and/or application. As historian Marla R. Miller noted, "The sheer variety and volume of material related to these projects reflects both the WAA's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The array and number of constituencies the organization tried to serve is truly inspiring in its attempt, but also reflects the difficulties inherent in trying to serve every facet of a mass social movement."<sup>492</sup>

This dilemma is the heart of my study of Women's History Month. Informed by my interest in feminist theory and a frustration with the lack of women, both as actors and as scholars, referenced in my undergraduate and graduate History classes, I questioned why women continued to be ignored, if Women's History Month was an established cultural event. I recognized Women's History Month as in coalition with history, in a mutually beneficial association of disparate interests organized under one label.

Organizations and coalitions allow different groups to join forces to achieve a common goal. Organizations utilizing the resources of WAA sought greater access to public spaces of power that largely relied on expanding public perceptions of women's interests and capabilities. Yet the methods of obtaining access to power frequently relied on/reaffirmed traditional sources and hierarchies of power: the master's tools. While the apparatuses that support a coalition/support power may be neutral, the organizations and coalitions first reflect and respond to the standpoint of its membership. The political, economic, and social

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<sup>491</sup> WAA records, unnamed memo, 3.

<sup>492</sup> Marla R. Miller, "Tracking the Women's Movement through the Women's Action Alliance," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 156.



limitations placed on women's organizational and legislative power limited outcomes, preserving the very structures that supported men's supremacy.

Traditionally, history relied on universals. One or two examples spoke for entire classes of people. This practice solidified knowledge into a hierarchy. Variances to this history inspired judgement and/or dismissal. In response, women's historians undertook specific methodologies and perspectives to combat this discrimination, engaging in long-term strategies. Founding American History Association(AHA) executive member and American History professor Lucy Salmon (1853-1927) insisted that women be treated no differently than men in history, as equal representatives of the universal. A supporter of suffrage, Salmon argued that, "history meant progress toward democracy and equality."<sup>493</sup>

Women reformed institutions that excluded them by establishing organizations and academic positions. In 1929, the Berkshire Conference for Women Historians formed, to promote social connection and scholarship for women in a time of exclusion from the formal practice of history. In the 1930s, research universities established endowed chairs for women in history. New Deal policies expanded progressive debates of universalism. Equality and human rights increasingly became a matter of popular discussion. Women began to identify as a separate interest group, sharing experiences of discrimination based on gender. Women historians and organizations began to archive information. Written histories of women made the lives of women more evident.

Affirmative action policies implemented in response to Civil Rights initiatives shifted discussions of difference in the 1960s. The Kennedy administration created the first national

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<sup>493</sup> Vivian Graff Rosenberg, "How Lucy Maynard Salmon Changed History," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 1986, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1986/0623/uluc-f1.html>.

and state Commissions on the Status of Women, legitimizing women's concerns as an interest groups. The National Organization for Women (NOW) formed in 1966. The Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP) became the voice for women's interests in the AHA in 1969, with women appointed to policy committees within the larger AHA body. Separate publications of women's journals validated and professionalized the writing of women's history.

In the 1970s and beyond, historians in many specialties began to challenge the master narrative of universalism and expanded their inquiries into systems of knowledge and political consciousness, recognizing women as valuable historical agents. By applying feminist theory, narratives became less homogeneous and simplistic. Historians increasingly questioned how events, periods, social, and intellectual foundations are implicated in historical record. Historical narratives became more flexible: an uncomfortable position for those historians invested exclusively in linear time, in narratives founded solely on cause and effect. This flexibility also acted as a warning, as "Scholars who do not carefully weigh the questions they ask, the types of information they collect, and the explanations they construct, may well find themselves uncritically serving a particular viewpoint or interpretive tradition."<sup>494</sup>

And therein lies my key/question of history: how to recognize women as having power; as being both separate from yet inexplicably intertwined with each other and with men; as being historically noteworthy, regardless of their connection (or lack of) to power. While Women's History Month commemorations provide cause and effect, a memory of events, for women's history, the practice of this commemoration continues to rely on politically and

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<sup>494</sup> John L. Rury, "History, Theory and Education" *History of Education Quarterly* 51(2011): 218.

culturally highlighted meaning and assigned significance of women's experiences and achievements. Determining women's history through the limits of a calendar-determined event does a real disservice to the scores of historians and activists that have long-questioned biased narratives and policies. In order to change the future, the whole story needs telling, without false limitations.

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