

FEMINISM'S HISTORY

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In 1974, Lois Banner and Mary Hartman published a book of essays they called *Clio's Consciousness Raised*.¹ Consisting of papers from the 1973 Berkshire Conference on Women's History, it was a rallying cry for many of us, an assertion of our intention to make women proper objects of historical study. If the Muse of History had too long sung the praises of men ("glorifying the countless mighty deeds of ancient times for the instruction of posterity"²), it was time now to bestow a similar glory on women. The second of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory), Clio's special province was history (and according to some accounts also epic poetry—a version of history). Our challenge to her seemed simple: to make women's stories central to the memory she transmitted to mortal humans. In order to ease her task, we would supply the materials she needed: histories of the lives and activities of women in the past.

Of course, no challenge to the gods is simple and our effort could easily have been construed as hubris, for we were presuming to tell Clio what to say. The Muses have meted out dire punishment to those who sought to interfere or compete with them. When the Pierides tried to out-sing the Muses, they were turned into magpies, ducks, and other squawking birds. When the Sirens claimed to sing better, the Muses plucked out their feathers and made crowns for themselves. The minstrel Thamyras was blinded and sent to Hades for having boasted that he could sing more beautifully than the Muses. And, less cruelly, they had the last word when Prometheus claimed that he, not they, created the letters of the alphabet. This could have been a matter of dispute, the chroniclers tell us, "had not the Muses invented all tales, including that of Prometheus."³

Our goal was not so much to compete with Clio as to emulate her, although there is always an element of competition in such identification. Like her, we wanted to tell edifying stories whose import went beyond their literal content to reveal some larger truth about human relationships—in our case, about gender and power. Like her, we wanted to be recognized as the just source of those stories, although for us there was no classical myth to authorize the claim. Like her, too, we wanted all of history as our province: we were not just adding women to an existing body of stories, we were changing the way the stories would be told. In our identification with Clio, we revealed the double aspect of our feminist project: to change the discipline fundamentally by writing women into history and by taking our rightful place as historians.

The last several decades have seen the realization of both these aims. Of course the achievement is not perfect; neither women's history nor women historians are fully equal players in the discipline and we have by no means rewritten all the stories. Indeed, the temporal and geographic unevenness of our accomplishment—far greater success in Euro-American modern history than in ancient, medieval, early Modern, and non-Western history; far more success in introducing women into the picture than in reconceiving it in terms of gender—suggests there is more to be done. Still, the gains are undeniable. Unlike Clio, we cannot punish those who would deny our accomplishment, nor can we be only amused by the folly of those brothers of Prometheus who claim to be the real innovators, treating us as imitators or usurpers. (We still get angry.) We can, however, point to an enormous corpus of writing, an imposing institutional presence, a substantial list of journals, and a foothold in popular consciousness that was unimaginable when Banner and Hartman published their book almost thirty years ago. If we have not taken over history, we have claimed a portion of the field; once viewed as transgressors, we are now in possession of legitimate title.

But ownership, for those who began as revolutionaries, is always an ambiguous accomplishment. It is at once a victory and a sell-out, the triumph of critique and its abandonment. This is difficult for feminists who, despite all the derision cast upon them by socialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have been revolutionaries dedicated to overturning patriarchy, breaking the oppressive chains of sexism, liberating women from the stereotypes that confine them, and bringing them onto the stage of history. The realization of at least some positive change over the past decade—which I have just characterized for historians as gaining ownership of a piece of the field—has produced some ambivalence and uncertainty about the future. Have we won or lost? Have we been changed by our success? What does the move from embattled outsider to recognized insider portend for our sense of self? Has our presence transformed the discipline or have we simply been absorbed into it? Ought we to be content with maintaining and reproducing what we have gained? Or should we be responding to new challenges that may threaten our proprietary standing? Does women's history have a future, or is it history? And how might we imagine that future? These are questions also being asked about women's studies and about feminism.

As the millennium approached, any number of forums was organized in the United States to speculate about the future. To take only two examples: In 1997, I edited a special issue of the journal *differences* called "Women's Studies on the Edge"—a title meant to evoke Pedro Almodovar's film, "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown." Although we chose

it playfully, the allusion turned out to be an apt characterization of how edgy some of us feel when asked to think about the future.⁴ In 1999, the *Journal of Women's History* organized a terrific intergenerational exchange among Americanists Anne Firor Scott, Sara Evans, Elizabeth Faue, and Susan Cahn.⁵ (The four constitute a lineage: Scott was Evans' teacher, Evans taught Faue and Cahn.) In an otherwise rich and wide-ranging discussion, these historians kept avoiding the topic of the future (although that was the stated purpose of the conversation). At one point, Anne Scott confessed that in thinking about "where women's history should, or might, go from here," she found herself "running up against a wall" (29). Liz Faue thought we needed to "take time out to dream," to exercise imagination and creativity to get beyond the impasse (211). But Sara Evans summed up what appeared to be a general reluctance among them, "Ah, the future," she sighed, "I agree . . . that this is the part of the conversation I find most perilous" (205).

Why would the future of a successful movement be so difficult to envision? In some ways we already know the answer—it is a form of social movement analysis. An aging generation of feminist scholar-activists looks back nostalgically on its wild youth, wondering (but not daring to ask aloud) if all the gains we have made were worth it. The institutionalization of women's history means its end as a campaign. Our research and professional activities seem to have lost their purposive political edge and their sense of dedication to building something larger than an individual career. The community of feminist scholars, whose vitality was manifest in fierce divisions no less than in shared commitments, seems diffused now. And at least among historians of women, the theoretical and political stakes no longer seem as high, disagreements seem more personal or generational. If there is relief at the end of the need to conspire in late-night strategy sessions, to have constantly to justify one's scholarship and that of one's students to skeptical or hostile colleagues, and to take pleasure, too, in the quantity, quality, and diversity of work produced under the rubric of women's history, there is nonetheless a sense of loss. For many of us, being embattled was energizing—it elicited strategic and intellectual creativity unmatched by our earlier graduate school experiences. Aspiring to be Clio, we became a subversive version of her: activism confirmed agency. We were producers of new knowledge, transmitters of revised memory, fashioning tales to inspire ourselves and the generations to come—all in the face of opponents more formidable than the Pierides or the Sirens, opponents who had the power to discipline us for what they took to be our pretensions and misdeeds. From insurgents, we have now become disciplinarians and it is inevitable, I think, that there is something of a let down

in this exchange of subject identities. It is one thing to criticize disciplinary power from the outside, but quite another to be on the inside, committed to the teaching of established bodies of scholarship. That kind of teaching necessarily seeks to reproduce feminist history in rising generations of students, but it is often resistant to the kind of critical challenges that were its defining characteristic.

As academic feminism has gained institutional credibility, it has also seemed to lose its close connection to the political movement that inspired it. In the 1970s and 1980s, we were the knowledge-producing arm of a broad-based feminist movement devoted to radical social change. During the 1990s, there were critical attacks on, and guilt-ridden condemnations of, the diminished contact between scholars and the grassroots, as well as injunctions to maintain or rebuild those ties. But that effort has foundered, not (as is sometimes alleged) because feminist scholars have retreated to ivory towers (the opposition between academic and political feminism was always a mischaracterization), but because the political movement itself has become fragmented, dispersed into specific areas of activism. This does not mean, as some journalists have claimed, that feminism is dead. Rather, concerns about the status and condition of different kinds of women have infiltrated many more realms of law and policy than was the case at the height of the movement, just as questions about gender have bled into areas of study that were resistant to feminism in the early days of women's studies.⁶

Discontinuous, coordinated, strategic operations with other groups have replaced the sense of a continuous struggle on behalf of women represented as a singular entity. This change is tied to the loss of a grand teleological narrative of emancipation, one that allowed us to conceive of the cumulative effect of our efforts: freedom and equality were the inevitable outcomes of human struggle, we believed, and that belief gave coherence to our actions, defined us as participants in a progressive "movement." (We were on the side of redemptive history.) Although discontinuity and dispersed strategic operations are eminently political in nature (and for a younger generation, a familiar way of operating), the loss of the continuity that came with the notion of history as inevitably progressive helps explain the difficulty an older generation has in imagining a future. (They take discontinuity to be regressive—the opposite of progressive, which it was for those who watched fascism in Europe destroy liberal institutions in the 1930s—when, in fact, now in the twenty-first-century context, discontinuity seems to me to be more closely allied to radical (left) critiques.)

Another aspect of the successful institutionalization of women's history is the dulling of the critical edge that comes with being on the margin. There was much debate in the 1980s (perhaps a bit more among literary

scholars than historians) about the ultimate benefits of integration. Was the absence of women in the curriculum simply a gap in knowledge that needed to be filled? Or did it reveal something more pernicious about the patriarchal (or phallogentric) organization of knowledge itself? What kind of impact would women's studies have on the university? Would we simply provide information now lacking, or change the very nature of what counted as knowledge? And were these necessarily contradictory aims? "As long as women's studies doesn't question the existing model of the university," Jacques Derrida told a meeting of the Pembroke Center seminar in 1984, "it risks to be just another cell in the university beehive."⁷ Some insisted that, by definition, a feminine presence (in history textbooks and history departments from which women were usually excluded) was a subversion of the status quo. Wasn't "becoming visible" itself a challenge to the prevailing historical orthodoxy that maintained women's absence from politics and history? Others of us argued that the radical potential of a women's history would be lost without a thoroughgoing critique of the presumptions of the discipline (its notion, for example, that agency is somehow inherent in the wills of individuals; its inattention to language in the construction of subjects and their identities; its lack of reflection on the implicit interpretive powers of narrative). It is significant, I think, that the lively reform-versus-revolution debate has receded from discussions among women's historians. With at least some measure of reform achieved, the troubling questions are more mundane: overspecialization, overproduction, and fragmentation, which undermine the cohesiveness of the community of feminist scholars and make impossible any mastery of the entire corpus of women's history. Even those who do share a common reading list are more likely to debate the merits of a particular interpretation than to ask how it advances a feminist critical agenda. Preoccupied with the details of administering programs, the implementation or adjustment of curricular offerings, the supervision of undergraduate majors, and the placement of doctoral candidates, we imagine the future as a continuation of the present rather than as liberation from it.

Still another reason it is so difficult to look forward is that the university into which we have been incorporated is itself undergoing major structural change. Having been critics on the outside, we are now advocates on the inside, looking to preserve the institution—faculty governed, tenure granting, knowledge producing, space of critical inquiry—from those who would reorganize it according to corporate models in which, as Bill Readings put it, "clients are sold services for a fee."⁸ The need to prevent the "ruin" of the university more often casts feminists as defenders of the status quo than as agents of change. The temptation is to use our analyses of power to shore up what we have won, protecting it from erosion by CEO-

presidents and trustees who treat ideas as commodities and scholars as retailers, not producers, of ideas. There is a new need to cooperate with colleagues, some of whom were once our adversaries, on a common agenda committed to the preservation of the academy as we have known it. In this context, demands for radical revisioning of the entire enterprise seem out of place, if not dangerous. Instead, we vigilantly guard the boundaries of our field, protesting unfair distributions of resources, alert to incursions on our turf from new and sexier areas of scholarship, and wary of surveyors who might redraw the maps we have followed so well. Our protectionism sometimes even leads us to collaborate with those administrators who are intent on commodifying the life of the mind. If we are indeed one of the cells in the university beehive, our interest now is in maintaining both the position of that cell and the health of the entire beehive. Defense of the status quo (and of the humanist principles that underlie it) seems far more urgent than holding to dreams of radical transformation. We are, I think, witnessing a version of what Nancy Cott, referring to the post-suffrage era, called "The Grounding of Modern Feminism"—the practical implementation (necessarily falling short) of ideals and emancipatory claims; the acceptance of what is instead of a continued quest for what ought to be; the domestication of fervent desire.⁹

Fervent desire is a gift of the Muses, a kind of madness that takes over, igniting and transforming the subject. According to Plato, it "seizes a tender, virgin soul and stimulates it to rapt passionate expression.... But if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet [we might substitute 'good historian by discipline'], then shall he and his works of sanity ... be brought to naught."¹⁰

Our careful analyses of the structural causes and effects of the rise and fall of social movements do not make much room for divine madness (do not let us see its operations), but if we are working with or as Clio, we need to take it into account. And when we do look for it, we find evidence that it matters in our ability to imagine the future. Over and over again, in the cross-generational conversation published within these pages, the historians describe their attraction to women's history in terms of passion, signifying the inspiration and arousal elicited by the Muses. Sara Evans talks of women's history as "a life-absorbing passion" (11); Liz Faue recounts the awakening in graduate school of her "passion" for women's history (13) and the terrific excitement of sharing "new words, new ideas, and new experiences jumbled together" in "wild cacophony" (23); Anne Scott recalls an "impassioned statement" she made at a meeting of the Organization of American Historians calling for attention to those whom traditional his-

torical accounts had overlooked (19); and Susan Cahn refers to her "passionate" pursuit of feminism/history (15). Looking at the current contraction of tenure-track faculty positions, Sara Evans worries that students with "a great passion for women's history" will be deterred by the job market from following their desire (214).

It is, of course, possible that passion here has a rote, even moralizing quality. But I think it actually connotes deep feeling with an erotic component. The world being evoked by the notion of passion is the "female world of love and ritual" that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg so brilliantly described in 1975. Existing within the terms of normative heterosexuality (indeed defined by them), it was nonetheless deeply "homosocial," and thrilling for that reason.¹¹ Bonnie Anderson (in *Joyous Greetings*) and Leila Rupp (in *Worlds of Women*) have portrayed international feminist movements in similar terms.¹² Women's history, before its institutionalization, was like those nineteenth and early twentieth century worlds. All that libidinal energy devoted to women—as objects of inquiry, subjects of rights, students, colleagues, and friends, and enhanced by the excitement of trespass—we were boldly claiming a previously denied right of access to the field of history. Men were present, to be sure, as targets of anger, power holders whose resistance or indifference needed to be overcome, but they were largely irrelevant to the experience of the movement. Men were the enemy against whom our political and affective community was defined.

Some of the difficulty we have now in thinking about the future is, I think, a symptom of melancholy, an unwillingness to let go of the highly charged affect of the homosocial world we have lost, indeed an unwillingness even to acknowledge that it has been lost. The melancholic wants to reverse time, to continue living as before. Melancholia, Freud tells us, is a "reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."¹³ Unlike mourning, which consciously addresses the loss, melancholy is an unconconscious process; the lost object is not understood as such. Instead, the melancholic identifies with the lost object and displaces her grief and anger onto herself. In the melancholic, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged . . . as though it were . . . the forsaken object."¹⁴ The judgment is harsh, and the normal process by which sexual energy (libido) is directed to another object is interrupted. Turned in upon herself, the melancholic dwells only in the past. To be able to think the future means to be willing to separate oneself from the lost object, avow the loss, and find a new object for passionate attachment.¹⁵

There is no question that when women's history came of age, the intensity of the passion associated with the campaign to secure its legitimacy

waned. However much remains to be done in this unevenly developed field, the early thrills of discovery do not now drive our work in the same way. For one thing, the world of history departments (as that of the university more generally) is heterosocial (even if women's studies programs remain homosocial); our world is no longer exclusively female. For another, the expansion of the field has brought some remarkable innovation. It is not only that, having heeded the criticism of women of color, of Third World women, and of lesbians in the 1980s, we have taken differences among women to be axiomatic; it is also that, having refined our theory, we have increasingly substituted gender for women as the object of our inquiry. The scholarship we produce is thus no longer focused uniquely on women as a singular category. And this has meant that the satisfying cohesiveness of the movement—women as subjects and objects of their own history—has disappeared, if indeed it ever existed. (I will suggest later that this cohesiveness has largely been established retrospectively, as part of the nostalgia of melancholy.)¹⁶

At one point in the *Journal of Women's History* conversation, Liz Faue used an occupational metaphor to characterize the change in the practice of women's history over the past decades. She suggested that a generation of artisans and their apprentices had carefully crafted histories "that had political meaning and sound methodology" (210). They then faced competition from "other historians" who, either less committed to feminism or in possession of "hot theories" (or both), flooded the market with mass-produced shoddy goods. Although craftswomen continued to produce work of high quality, it was hard to distinguish it from the cheap stuff. As a result, the entire enterprise was devalued. Faue's colleagues rejected the metaphor as inapt (Susan Cahn notes that "there was certainly no shortage of 'bad' history produced by the older 'artisanal' mode" [215]) and Liz did not feel strongly about pushing it. (A really nice aspect of this conversation, enabled by email technology, was its informality and the willingness of the participants to be tentative, exploratory, and open.) I find the resort to a model of proletarianization telling, not because of its applicability to the field of women's history (if anything, it is theories of social movements, not of occupational transformation, that offer the more relevant comparisons), but because it is a recurrent theme, employed by workers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and by labor historians, to mourn the precapitalist "world we have lost." In Faue's usage, the theme of proletarianization articulates affective loss in more familiar (and more distancing) economic terms. It is, I submit, at least in part, the inability to acknowledge directly the affective loss (the passionate idealization of women that drove women's history), that makes it (in Faue's words) "so hard to see through the veil that hides the future from the present" (211).

The "veil that hides the future" is Freud's "shadow of the object"—melancholy. I take it to mean we have been confused about the source of our passion, mistaking "women" for the excitement of the new and unknown. What if our sense that we already know what feminist history is blocks that divine madness, that inspired arousal, which is precisely an encounter with the unknown? What if we rewrote *Feminism's History* as a story of a circulating critical passion, slipping metonymically along a chain of contiguous objects, alighting for a while in an unexpected place, accomplishing a task, and then moving on? I use the term "*Feminism's History*" here to mean not only the history of feminism and the history written by feminists, but also as a colloquial insinuation, as in "well, you know, that woman has a history."

Since at least the eighteenth century, feminism has used history in different ways at different times as a critical weapon in the struggle for women's emancipation. *Feminism's History* has offered demonstrations, in the form of exemplary instances from the past, of women's worthiness to engage in the same activities as men (wage-earning, education, citizenship, rulership). It has provided heroines to emulate and lineages for contemporary activists—membership in fictive families of history makers. *Feminism's History* has exposed as instruments of patriarchal power stories that explained the exclusion of women as a fact of nature. And it has written new histories to counter the "lie" of women's passivity, as well as their erasure from the records that constitute collective memory. It has not only contested stereotypical versions of "woman," but it has also insisted on profound differences among "women." And it has formed any number of alliances, focused on many aspects of power, to advance its ends. *Feminism's History* is both a compilation of women's experiences and a record of the different strategic interventions employed to argue women's cause. It can, of course, stand on its own, but it is best understood as a doubly subversive critical engagement: with prevailing normative codes of gender and with the conventions and (since history's formation as a discipline in the late nineteenth century) rules of historical writing. *Feminism's History* has been a variable, mutable endeavor, a flexible strategic instrument not bound to any orthodoxy. The production of knowledge about the past, while crucial, has not been an end in itself, but rather (at certain moments—and not always in the service of an organized political movement) has provided the substantive terms for a critical operation that uses the past to disrupt the certainties of the present and so opens the way to imagining a different future. This critical operation is the dynamic that drives feminism; in Lacanian terms it is an operation of desire, unsatisfied by any particular object, "constant in its pressure," ever in search of an elusive fulfillment (elusive because attainment of the utopian aim of

abolishing sexual difference altogether would mean the death of feminism).¹⁷

Desire, Lacan tells us, is driven by lack, ruled by dissatisfaction; it is "unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued."¹⁸ Its existence exposes the insufficiency of any conclusive settlement; something more is always wanted. Desire moves metonymically; relations among its objects are characterized by unexpected contiguities. The movements are lateral, and they do not follow a single direction. We might say here that for feminism desire is driven by, or—better—is itself a critical faculty, a form of critique. Critique, as the German philosophers (Kant, Hegel, Marx, the Frankfurt School) defined it, has the same dissatisfied, unconscious, passionate quality. Even as its formulations are rational, its motivations are not entirely known. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley describe critique as "a disruptive, disorienting and at times destructive enterprise of knowledge."¹⁹ "In the insistence on the availability of all human production to critique, that is to the possibility of being rethought through an examination of constitutive premises, the work of critique is potentially without boundary or end."²⁰ The objects of critique are the forms and manifestations of ideology and power (their underlying truths, their foundational assumptions) and these are as varied and unpredictable as desire's objects. As Brown and Halley describe it, critique (like desire) consists in pursuit; "it embodies a will to knowledge" whose exercise yields pleasure—the pleasure that comes from contemplation of the unknown.²¹ "For critique hazards the opening of new modalities of thought and political possibility, and potentially affords as well the possibility of enormous pleasure—political, intellectual, and ethical."²² That pleasure means not just positive affect but passion, is indicated by references to a "kindling spirit," "euphoria," and "pleasure itself as a crucial source of political motivation."²³

Conceiving of feminism as a restless critical operation, as a movement of desire, detaches it from its origins in Enlightenment teleologies and the utopian promise of complete emancipation. It does not, however, assume that desire operates outside of time; rather it is a mutating historical phenomenon, defined as and through its displacements. Feminism emerged in the context of liberal democracy's proclamation of universal equality, discursively positioned in and as contradiction—not just in the arena of political citizenship, but in most areas of economic and social life. Despite many changes in the meanings and practices of liberal democracy, its discursive hegemony remains, and feminism remains one of its contradictions. By calling attention to itself as contradiction, feminism has challenged the ways in which differences of sex have been used to organize relations of power. Feminism's historical specificity comes from the fact that it works within and against whatever are the prevailing foundational assumptions

of its time. Its critical force comes from the fact that it exposes the contradictions in systems that claim to be coherent (republicanism that excludes women from citizenship; political economy that attributes women's lower wages to their biologically determined lower value as producers; medical teaching that conflates sexual desire with the natural imperatives of reproduction; exclusions within women's movements that press for universal emancipation) and calls into question the validity of categories taken as first principles of social organization (*the family, the individual, the worker, masculine, feminine, Man, Woman*).²⁴

One example from our own times of the critical operation of feminism is the relationship of women's history to social history. It is often said, with a certain sense of inevitability, that women's history became acceptable with the rise to prominence of social history. The emphasis on everyday life, ordinary people, and collective action made women an obvious group to include. I would put it differently: there was nothing inevitable about women's history arising from social history. Rather, feminists argued, within the terms and against the grain of behaviorism and new left Marxism, that women were a necessary consideration for social historians. If they were omitted, key insights were lost about the ways class was constructed. While male historians celebrated the democratic impulses of the nascent working class, historians of women pointed to its gender hierarchies. We did not only correct for the absence of women in labor histories—although we surely did do that (we showed that "worker" was an exclusionary category; that women were skilled workers, not just a cheap source of labor; that women called strikes and organized unions, were not just members of the ladies' auxiliary)—we also offered a critique of the ways in which labor historians reproduced the machismo of trade unionists. This did not always sit well, indeed feminists found themselves (still find themselves) ghettoized at meetings of labor historians. But there was certain thrill of discovery as we tried to lead our colleagues to unknown territory. In the process, we did convince some of them to consider the ways in which gender consolidated men's identity as workers and as members of a working class, and the ways in which nature was used not only to justify differential treatments of male and female workers, but also to regulate family structure and patterns of employment.

In labor history (as in other areas of history, from diplomatic to cultural), Liz Faue comments, "women's history has 'defamiliarized' the terrain of other historians" (205). Defamiliarized is exactly right—the meanings taken for granted, the terms by which historians had explained the past, the lists of so-called appropriate topics for historical research, were called into question and shown to be neither as comprehensive nor as objective as was previously believed. What was once unthinkable—that gender was a useful tool of historical analysis—has become thinkable. But that

is not the end of the story. Now a received disciplinary category, gender is being critically examined by the next wave of feminists and others, who rightly insist that it is only one of several equally relevant axes of difference. Sex does not subsume race, ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality; these attributions of identity intersect in ways that need to be specified. To restrict our view to sexual difference is thus to miss the always complex ways in which relations of power are signified by differences. The newly safe terrain of gender and women's history is now itself being defamiliarized as queer, postcolonial, and ethnic studies (among others) challenge us to push the boundaries of our knowledge, to slide (or leap?) metonymically to contiguous domains. For some, it seems premature to branch out before we have fully consolidated our gains, but that is the wrong way to think about Feminism's History. The impulse to reproduce what is already known is profoundly conservative, whether it comes from traditional political historians or historians of women. What makes—has made—Feminism's History so exciting is precisely its radical refusal to settle down, to call even a comfortable lodging a "home."

Melancholy rests on a fantasy of a home that never really was. Our idealization of the intensely political, woman-oriented moment of recent feminist history and our desire to preserve it (by speaking of it as the essence of women's history) has prevented us from appreciating the excitement and energy of the critical activity that was then and is now the defining characteristic of feminism. Feminist history was never primarily concerned with documenting the experiences of women in the past, even if that was the most visible means by which we pursued our objective. The point of looking to the past was to destabilize the present, to challenge patriarchal institutions and ways of thinking that legitimated themselves as natural, to make the unthinkable thought (to detach gender from sex, for example). In the 1970s and 1980s, women's history was part of a movement that consolidated the identity of women as political subjects, enabling activism in many spheres of society and winning unprecedented public visibility and, eventually, some success. The ERA did not pass, but other anti-discrimination measures did. Title IX had a tremendous impact as did affirmative action and campaigns to identify and punish sexual harassment. Patriarchy did not fall, gender hierarchies remain, and backlash is evident (evolutionary biology is its most recent incarnation), but many barriers to women (especially white, middle-class professional women) have been removed. And the United Nations has declared for the entire world to acknowledge that women's rights are human rights. Women's status as subjects of history, subject-producers of historical knowledge, and subjects of politics seems to have been secured in principle if not always in practice.

The public acceptance of women's identity as political subjects made redundant the historical construction of that identity—there was nothing new to be championed in this realm. Stories designed to celebrate women's agency began to seem predictable and repetitious, more information gathered to prove a point that had already been made. Moreover, the politics of identity took a melancholic, conservative turn in the last decades of the twentieth century (as Wendy Brown has so persuasively demonstrated).²⁵ Victims and their injuries came to the fore and, although a good deal of effort was expended on their behalf, the situation of women as wounded subjects does not inspire either creative politics or history. Increasingly, too, differences among women became more difficult to reconcile in a single category, even if it was pluralized. "Women" (however modified) seemed too much a universalization of white, Western, straight women, not capacious enough a category to alone do the work that considerations of differences among women required. The emergence of new political movements seemed to call for new kinds of political subjects. Singular identities did not work as they once did for the construction of multiple and mutable strategic alliances. In this context, a new generation of feminists turned their critical lens on the construction of identity itself as an historical process. Seeking to defamiliarize identity's contemporary claims, they emphasized the complex ways in which the identity "women" operates, and not exclusively to signify gender. If race, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality play equally significant parts in the definition of "women," then gender is not a useful enough category of analysis.

But to tell the story as I have implies a singular narrative that actually was not the case. We did not move neatly from identity to gender to a critique of subject formation. Feminism's History in these years is not a story of a unified assault (Clio brandishing gender, singing of women). Even as the identity of "women" was being consolidated, even as women seemed the primary object of our inquiry, there were critical, conflicting voices pointing out the limits of "women" and "gender," introducing other objects and theorizing different ways of considering the historical significances of sexual difference. Gayle Rubin, in 1975, opening the way for (among other things) the rethinking and historicizing of normative heterosexuality.²⁶ Natalie Davis cautioning us in 1976 to study not women, but gender groups, and refusing reductive readings of the symbols of masculine and feminine, reminding us of the multiple and complex historical meanings of those categories.²⁷ The IX Barnard Conference on the Scholar and the Feminist in 1982 blown apart by debates about the place of sex in representations of women's agency.²⁸ Denise Riley in 1988 suggesting that the category of women was not foundational, but historical.²⁹ The following year, Ann Snitow pointing out that feminism was divided by irrecon-

cilable desires for both sameness and difference.³⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, looking to escape the totalizing effects of simple oppositions between white and black women, theorizing "the metalanguage of race" in 1992. "By fully recognizing race as an unstable, shifting, and strategic reconstruction," she wrote, "feminist scholars must take up new challenges to inform and confound many of the assumptions currently underlying Afro-American history and women's history. We must problematize much more of what we take for granted. We must bring to light and to coherence the one and the many that we always were in history and still actually are today."³¹ Afsaneh Najmabadi in 1997 declaring her "not-so-hidden pleasure at being unable or unwilling to identify myself in [recognizable identity terms] no matter how many times hybridized," and confounding those terms, too, in her work on gender and nation-building in Iran.³²

I offer these examples with dates attached not to demonstrate a cumulative process through which our work got smarter or more sophisticated. Precisely the opposite is the case. The critical questioning of prevailing categories of both mainstream and feminist work is consistently present; and its object keeps changing (these are illustrations of the metonymic slippage I referred to earlier). In fact, in a riot of promiscuous exploration (Liz Faue's "wild cacophony"), many objects overlap and coexist (among these are sexuality, race, symbols of masculine and feminine, the changing representation and uses of gender and racial difference, the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender in the building of nations). It is this critical activity—the relentless interrogation of the taken-for-granted—that always moves us somewhere else, from object to object, from the present to the future. Those accounts that insist that "women" are (have been and must ever be) the sole subject/object of feminist history tell a highly selective story that obscures the dynamic that makes thinking the future possible. There have been, of course, strenuous efforts at boundary keeping, and these selective stories are among them, but they have been of little avail: heedless of the broken hearts left in its wake, feminist critical desire keeps moving. This is not a betrayal or a defection, but a triumph; it is the way the passion of the feminist critical spirit is kept alive.

I have been arguing that the primary role of feminist history has not been to produce women as subjects but to explore and contest the means and effects of that subject production as it has varied over time and circumstance. To rest content with any identity—even one we have helped produce—is to give up the work of critique. That goes for our identity as historians as well as feminists: having won entry into the profession by exposing its politics of disciplinary formation, it will not do now to settle down and enforce the existing rules, even if we have helped create some of

them. It is not a matter of an anarchic refusal of discipline, but a subversive use of its methods and a more self-conscious willingness to entertain topics and approaches that were once considered out of bounds. It is what we do not know that entices us; it is new stories we yearn to tell. Our passion for women's history was a desire to know and to think what had hitherto been unthinkable. Passion, after all, thrives on the pursuit of the not-yet-known.

Interdisciplinarity has been one of ways we have learned to tell new stories. That is why it has been a hallmark of feminist scholarship. Women's studies seminars, programs, and departments have been the proving grounds for the articulation of new knowledge. They have provided sustenance for research considered untenable in traditional departments; legitimation for those who might otherwise have been untenurable. It was questions posed from elsewhere (from outside one's own disciplinary problematic) that often prodded historians (such as myself) to seek unconventional answers; it was the engaged response from other feminist scholars that made the work seem worthwhile. We had at least two things in common: questions about women, gender, and power, and (because simply comparing data about women did not get us very far) a quest for theories that could provide alternative ways of seeing and knowing. "Theory," Stuart Hall has famously stated, "makes meanings slide."³³ And it was exactly that destabilization of received meaning that was feminism's aim. The exploration of theory (Marxism, psychoanalysis, liberalism, structuralism, poststructuralism) and the attempt to formulate something we could call feminist theory were ways of overcoming disciplinary barriers, finding a common language despite our different academic formations. Although many historians of women, echoing their disciplinary colleagues, worried that theory and history were incompatible, in fact it was "theory" that enabled the critique of a history that assumed a singular knowing subject (*the* historian) and some topics more worthy of investigation than others. Whether it is now acknowledged or not, some commonly accepted axioms of feminist historical analysis are in fact theoretical insights about how differences are constructed: there is neither a self nor a collective identity without an other (or others); there is no inclusiveness without exclusion; no universal without a rejected particular; no neutrality that does not privilege an interested point of view; and power is always at issue in the articulation of these relationships. Taken as analytic points of departure, these axioms have become the foundation of an ongoing and far-reaching critical historical inquiry.

Feminist history thrives on interdisciplinary encounters. It has incorporated some of the teachings of theory, but it has rightly considered its primary focus to be the discipline of history itself. (After all, it is *Clio* who turns us on.) The tension between feminism and history (between subversion and establishment) has been difficult and productive, the one pushing

the limits of orthodoxy, the other policing the boundaries of acceptable knowledge. Whether we know it or not, the relationship is not one-sided, but interdependent. Feminism transforms the discipline by critically addressing its problematics from the perspective of gender and power, but without the disciplinary problematic there would be no feminist history. Since these problematics change (only partly because feminism transforms them), feminist history changes as well. In this sense, *Feminism's History* is always parasitic in relation to the discipline of history. The future depends in large part on the direction the discipline takes. Where is the feminist critique of cultural history? Of rationalist interpretations of behavior? What are the limits of now-accepted disciplinary understandings of gender? What are the histories of the uses of the categories of difference (racial, sexual, religious, ethnic, national, and more) that historians take to be self-evident characterizations of people in the past? These questions, relentless interrogations of accepted knowledges and approaches to them, are the signs of an active, future-oriented feminist critical desire.³⁴

If our relationship to our discipline is as a kind of critical gadfly, so it is to our colleagues in other disciplines and in newer areas of interdisciplinary study. It is we who introduce the difference of time into the categories employed by queer, postcolonial, transnational, and global studies. Strategic affiliations are not without their critical dimensions; feminist historians specialize in the temporal dimension. We are relativists when it comes to meanings—we know they vary over time. That makes us particularly good cultural critics. We can historicize the present's fundamental truths and expose the kinds of investments that drive them, in this way using the past not as the precursor to what is (typically the task of official history), but as its foil. Here we are double agents: practicing history to deepen and sharpen the critiques of new oppositional studies while slyly repudiating the discipline's emphasis on continuity and the unidirectionality of causality (past to present). There is a great future for double agents of this kind and a certain thrill in the job. It is destabilizing both to those we engage with and to ourselves. There is no worry that our identity will become fixed or our work complacent; there are always new strategic decisions to be made. To be sure, there are risks involved when orthodoxies (left and right) are challenged. But those are the risks that have characterized *Feminism's History* from the beginning, the source both of pleasure and danger, the guarantee of an opening to the future. Robyn Wiegman calls her new series of feminist scholarship at Duke University Press, "*The Next Wave*," suggesting that there's no end to *Feminism's History*—the passionate pursuit of the not-yet-known.³⁵

"Ah, the future. . . ."—it is perilous only if one denies feminist agency. Feminists are not only political subjects, but also desiring subjects, and, as

such, subjects who make history. This notion of agency as impelled by a quest for what we cannot ultimately know—by desire—is not mine and it is not new. In 1983, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson edited a book of essays called *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*.³⁶ Its major point was that women were not only political, but also sexual beings and that the study of sexuality—from many perspectives—opened “an area for play, for experimentation . . .” They also associated feminist scholarship with desire, and “desire,” they wrote, pointing to a distant horizon where “we might see what is coming in our direction,” “is ever renewed.”³⁷ I have extended this argument beyond the topic of sex and sexuality to characterize feminist agency itself. Our agency—our desire—is critique, the constant undoing of conventional wisdom; the exposure of its limits for fully satisfying the goals of equality. It drives us to unforeseen places. You never know what will next draw our attention or our ire. Critique/desire provides no map; it is rather a standard against which to measure the dissatisfactions of the present. Its path can only be seen in retrospect, but its motion is undeniable.³⁸ Historical study is a particularly effective form of feminist critique.

Ancient representations of Clio show her sometimes with a trumpet and a clepsydra (a water clock), perhaps heralding the passage of time. Time conceived as fluidity, flow (a particularly feminine representation), not easily contained. She is also shown with writing implements, books and scrolls, references to the fact that it was she who introduced the Phoenician alphabet to the Greeks. If Clio offered the tools of knowledge production, our task (as mortals) is to use them. We are not gods and thus cannot, like her, tell “all embracing true tale(s),” so we are driven by our critical faculty (inspired and aroused by Clio) always to revise, always to reach beyond our grasp for new knowledge, new stories to tell.

Since Clio has from the beginning been our inspiration, it is important to learn some things about her that are not so well known. The Muses had no permanent home: they danced on Mount Olympus; Mount Helicon was also their haunt. And they did not sit or walk—they flew. “. . . wherever they go they may go flying; for in such a way goddesses usually travel, as King Pyreneus of Daulis, who attempted to rape them, too late learned. For he perished when he leapt from the pinnacle of a tower trying to follow the flying Muses who escaped him.”³⁹ Those who fly escape the dangers of domination, the tyrannical powers of orthodoxy. Flight is also a positive course, a soaring; it traces the path of desire. When melancholy is left behind, that path opens for us. And passion returns as it readies itself for its latest pursuit of what has not yet been thought.

NOTES

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¹Lois Banner and Mary Hartman, *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women, Sex and Class in Women's History*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

²Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245a, trans. R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 57.

³<<http://eliki.com/portals/fantasy/circle/clio.html>> and <<http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/muses.html>>, both consulted 13 November 2002. I am grateful to Froma Zeitlin for these references.

⁴*differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9, no.3 (1997).

⁵Anne Firor Scott, Sara Evans, Elizabeth Faue, and Susan Cahn, "Women's History in the New Millennium: A Conversation Across Three Generations," *Journal of Women's History*, Part I. 11 (spring 1999): 9-30; Part II 11 (Summer 1999): 199-220. Citations in text refer to this conversation.

⁶This is the case both domestically and internationally, evident most visibly in the work of the United Nations Commission for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). See Françoise Gaspard, "Les femmes dans les relations internationales," *Politique Étrangère* 3-4 (2000): 731-41.

⁷Jacques Derrida, "Women in the Beehive: A Seminar," in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987): 190.

⁸Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996): 32.

⁹Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹⁰Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245a.

¹¹Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (autumn 1975): 1-29.

¹²Bonnie Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹³Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", SEXIV, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), 243.

¹⁴Ibid., 249.

¹⁵Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 57-66.

¹⁶For a trenchant analysis of the current state of women's studies, see Wendy Brown, "Women's Studies Unbound: Revolution, Mourning, Politics," *parallax* 9, no. 2 (2003): 3-16.

¹⁷Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious," in *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 1977): 292-324. See also Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, s.v. "desire" (London: Routledge, 1996): 37.

¹⁸Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1981), 154.

¹⁹Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, eds., *Left Legalism/Left Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

²⁰Ibid., 26.

²¹Ibid., 30.

²²Ibid., 29.

²³Ibid., 32.

²⁴Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

²⁵Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²⁶Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," reprinted in Joan W. Scott, *Feminism and History*, Oxford Readings in Feminism. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105-51.

²⁷Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," reprinted in *Feminism and History*, 79-104.

²⁸The collected papers of the conference appeared in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1984).

²⁹Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

³⁰Ann Snitow, "A Gender Diary," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Yeller (London: Routledge, 1990): 9-43.

³¹Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," reprinted in *Feminism and History*, 183-208, esp. 202.

³²Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Teaching and Research in Unavailable Intersections," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9, no.3 (1997): 76.

³³Stuart Hall, cited in Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 41.

³⁴See Ellen Rooney, "Discipline and Vanish: Feminism, The Resistance to Theory, and the Politics of Cultural Studies," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2 (Fall 1990): 14-28.

³⁵Robyn Wiegman, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?: A Second Opinion," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (winter 1999); and Robyn Wiegman, "Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11 (autumn 1999/2000): 107-36.

³⁶Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

³⁷*Ibid.*, 43.

³⁸Brown and Halley, *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, 33.

³⁹<<http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/MUSES.html>>, consulted 13 November 2002.

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