
Response: Re-reading *History Matters*

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I was raised as a middle child, third among four, and in the hurly-burly of a military family that moved every twelve months I had trouble being heard. This trouble haunts my work as a historian, for in my ever-continuing quest to be heard, I have come to adopt a straight-speaking style that can, if not constrained, almost “shout” at readers. Yes, clear language is nice; point-by-point arguments make for easy reading; and even repetition has its uses for rhetorical emphasis. But shouting is not subtle communication, and I sought to avoid it in pulling together my thoughts for *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*. To judge from these comments, I succeeded for three readers (Iris Berger, Ulrike Strasser, and Leila Rupp) and failed for a fourth (Judy Tzu-Chun Wu).

My objectives for the book were simple: I wanted to stimulate discussion among women’s and gender historians about our current practices, especially our present-mindedness, our connections to feminist politics, and our preferences for narratives of change. I also hoped to re-introduce some old terms (such as “continuity” and “patriarchy”) to our intellectual toolboxes and to add some new ones coined from my own work (especially “patriarchal equilibrium” and “lesbian-like”). I wrote throughout, as we all must do, from my own experiences, both personal and intellectual; I stretched as far as I could, but recognizing the limits of any one perspective, I explicitly hoped that my observations would be debated, emended, and expanded by historians whose backgrounds and expertise differ from what I could bring to the table. These four commentators have done just that, and I thank them for their engagement. Iris Berger’s report on how Africanists are interrogating patriarchy, gender, and feminism opens up interesting discussions for all of us; so, too, does Ulrike Strasser’s suggestions on how early modernists can flourish amid the relentless contemporaneity of modern academia. All of us can find useful talking points in Leila Rupp’s hesitations about “patriarchy” and “continuity.” And we can just as fruitfully build from Judy Tzu-Chun Wu’s explication of how immigration laws have shaped the intersections of gender and class in the histories of Asian Americans.

In the spirit of the discussions that can flow from these stimulating comments, let me add two further points. First, I think that we need not stumble over the matter of words. The comments offered here show that terms like “patriarchy” and “lesbian-like” are useful to think with, for they

can focus our minds and center our studies. But the thinking and analysis matter more than the words themselves. Thus, when Rupp concludes that "we need to understand how and why inequality between women and men has persisted, despite change over time and from place to place," I am with her 100 percent, even if she prefers to pursue this understanding without the term "patriarchy." And I am similarly in step with Wu when she says that we need "to pay attention to and analyze a variety of non-heteronormative behaviors and identifications," even if she works toward this end without the aid of "lesbian-like." Words are tools, not ends in themselves. If they work for you, use them; if they do not, put them aside.

That said, we should be clear about precisely what we are putting aside. I have had ample space in *History Matters* to elaborate on both "patriarchy" and "lesbian-like," and I will not repeat myself here. But I do not agree with Rupp's characterization of patriarchy as ideological; I would say instead that misogyny is one ideological component (racism is another) of a much more multi-faceted patriarchal power. Nor do I concur with Rupp's assumption that the "why" of patriarchal equilibrium necessarily leads us to either biological determinism or male culpability. To my mind, these are the Scylla and Charybdis of patriarchal studies. Each tempts us, but falsely so; we must avoid their grasp, pass between them, and journey on to a fuller understanding of how and why patriarchy has existed and does still exist. I am also taken aback by Wu's construal of "lesbian-like" as a crude weapon of political correctness. As I show in chapter 6 (using my own work, among others, as an example), women's and gender history has a lesbian problem. But I proposed "lesbian-like" as a tool that could help solve that problem, not as an enforcement measure. Aware that it might be clumsily wielded as what I called a "blunt instrument," I suggested that we use it in "playful, wise, and careful ways" to help us write feminist histories that are freer of heteronormativity (127). "Lesbian-like" can, I still believe, help us toward that goal; but I also firmly know that the term cannot, by itself, have any use whatsoever in judging whether a particular historian has or has not broken free from the snares of heteronormative thinking.¹

Second, I frankly hope that no one else will read *History Matters* as Judy Wu has done, for despite her expressed agreement with my main views, the book seems to have been an unpleasant screed for her: a holier-than-thou laying down of quasi-laws on what Wu calls "right" history and "right" perspectives; a nostalgic hymn to a supposed "golden age" of 1970s feminist history; an attack on her own work as a historian; and even an ugly resurrection of an "old story of privilege and oppression."² This is not the book I meant to write; it is not, I believe, the book I did write; but it is the book that Wu—who, as the youngest of the four commentators, an Asian American, and a historian of minority cultures in the United States,

represents groups I very much hope to reach in *History Matters*—has read. I regret her reading, and if others also hear more “shouts” than suggestions, I regret that too. Wu has taken my comments “personally,” and to some extent I welcome this self-reflection by readers, for surely each of us can benefit from thinking about the broader implications of the subjects we study, the methods we use, and the conclusions we reach. But I ask Wu—and all other readers—not to take my comments *too* personally, for the questions raised in *History Matters* address field-wide issues that transcend our independent labors. In the specific case on which the bulk of Wu’s comment focused—my observation that the biographical turn in women’s and gender history is especially suited to recovering the lives of articulate, well-off women—I have no objection whatsoever to any specific biography, including Wu’s study of Margaret Jessie Chung and my own of Cecilia Penifader.³ What I sought to raise was a question of trend and proportion within the broader field: given biography’s tilt toward the articulate and the privileged, should we worry that roughly one in every four projects in U.S. women’s and gender history is now adopting that approach? I appreciate Wu’s smart point that biography might be a better strategy in some parts of U.S. women’s and gender history than others, but surely the question of proportion still merits our attention and discussion.

History Matters was indeed intended to be, as three of these commentators have noted in their opening paragraphs, a “provocative” book. It raises awkward questions about the place of history in contemporary feminism, about difference and diversity in academia, about heteronormative values in women’s and gender history, and even about the feminist politics of our field. I was eager to be heard on these subjects, and my intent was to stimulate discussion, not shut it down. I meant to offer suggestions, not shouts; critiques, not dictates; observations, not truths. I very much hope the book will continue to provoke, as it has done here, further discussion about what we—in our varied roles as individual historians, as practitioners in the field of women’s and gender history, and as contributors to feminist projects—aim to accomplish when we search for new insights in the archives and teach new generations in our classrooms.

NOTES

I thank Nancy Hewitt for reviewing these remarks and the Huntington Library for a fellowship during which I wrote them.

³Wu’s own work on Margaret Jessie Chung is an example of the sort of open thinking I admire; she grapples forthrightly with evidence of Chung’s emotional and romantic attachments to women, with rumors about her lesbianism, with her long romantic relationship with the entertainer Sophie Tucker, and with Chung’s

own evident discomfort with a lesbian identity. Wu does not ignore, deny, or otherwise seek to suppress evidence, nor does she eschew the term "lesbian." See Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), esp. 103–15, 170–83.

²The quickest antidote to Wu's assertion that I see the 1970s as a golden age of feminist history can be found here: *History Matters*, 65.

³Judith M. Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295–1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999).
