
Some History Matters: Revisiting the Golden Age of Women's History

Judy Tzu-Chun Wu

In *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, Judith M. Bennett asks that practitioners of women's history take a hard look at themselves. She argues that women's history has largely lost its political edge, and correspondingly, feminism has lost interest in history. Bennett identifies herself as a European medievalist who came of age as a radical feminist during the decade of the 1970s. Consequently, she mourns the loss of connection between history and feminism, both for her own sake and for the broader community of scholars and activists whom she seeks to influence. Her book then serves as a warning and a call to arms for feminists and historians to reengage with one another.

Following a concise overview of the scholarly trends in women's history, Bennett demonstrates the value of taking a long historical approach to studying such issues as patriarchy, the wage gap, and lesbianism. Through discussions drawn almost entirely from her field of European medieval history, Bennett debunks the notion that premodern society was fundamentally different from modern society. Instead, she argues for the persistence of the "patriarchal equilibrium" as well as continuities in the ways in which women resisted heteronormative behaviors and identities. Bennett posits that by recognizing these connections, both historians and feminist theorists will be able to ask better questions as well as develop more accurate and politically relevant answers.

While I am largely sympathetic and supportive of Bennett's critique, I also question her criteria for evaluating the recent scholarship in women's history. Although her book is entitled *History Matters*, her argument suggests that only *some* history matters. She prefers studies that analyze the social and material conditions of women as opposed to the "cultural turn in women's history" that dissects performances and the language of gender (24). She questions the recent trend in biography or the focus on "women worthies" and calls for more studies that look at working women's lives (24). She, like some other historians, wonders if there is "an uncritical discourse of pluralism, a celebration of diversity," that overemphasizes differences between women rather than focusing on the systems of gender inequality that exist between men and women (25). Furthermore, she argues that this interest in racial difference and non-Western history may have inadvertently contributed to the shortening of the historical lens to the

modern period, thereby shifting attention away from the distant, particularly European, past. She also criticizes women's historians who shy away from "the L-word," viewing these individuals as sell-outs to the scholarly and heteronormative mainstream. Instead, she argues for the necessity of naming the unnamed.

In essence, the scholarship that Bennett deems as less worthy of a feminist historical project is basically deficient for political reasons. She qualifies most of her evaluations and dichotomizations, but the contrast between what she considers good feminist history and the not-so-good is still fairly stark. Although Bennett spends a large part of her book debunking the notion that premodern society was a "golden age" for women, she is simultaneously positing a golden age of feminist history. She calls for the return to a time when historians, including European medieval historians, were valued by the feminist community and when these scholars devoted themselves to studying the "right" topics from the "right" perspectives.

It is difficult not to take Bennett's criticisms personally. I did not come of age in the 1970s, although that era is the topic of my current study on American antiwar activists who traveled to socialist Asia and Canada. One of my specializations is Asian American women's history, a field which has tended to produce scholarship that focuses on the mid-nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. I also recently published a biography of a rather unusual woman, Dr. Margaret Chung, who was the first American-born Chinese female physician as well as a behind-the-scenes political broker during World War II. In my book, I asked the L-question about Chung and described a range of her non-heteronormative behavior but I never labeled my subject a lesbian. This refusal places me among a group of scholars who, according to Bennett, possess a lingering homophobic anxiety and a desire to achieve professional approval from the academic mainstream (115).

For the remainder of this review, I will take my cue from Judith Bennett. She used her experience of professional/political marginalization to launch a critique of women's history as a whole. I will discuss how her criticisms, as they relate to my work and intellectual interests, reveal some limitations to her assessment and solutions for our mutual field of women's history. In particular, I focus on three aspects of her argument: her concerns related to the overemphasis on female worthies rather than women workers; the juxtaposition between studies of diversity in the modern period versus the distant past; and her concept of "lesbian-like." Of these three points, I will devote more time to discussing the issue of class because of the complexities of this topic within the field of Asian American women's history.

In questioning the turn towards women's biography, Bennett is essentially raising the issue of elite versus social history. However, in a field like Asian American women's history, it is rather tricky to have the "right" class prospective. In Sylvia Yanagisako's insightful analysis of Asian American

history, she connected the absence of women in the early scholarship to the field's desired emphasis on the working class.¹ Asian American history, like second wave-inspired women's history, grew out of the radical social movements of 1960s and 1970s. Scholars in Asian American history consequently sought to recover the social history of such resistant labor subjects as Chinese immigrant miners and railroad workers, Japanese American farmers, and Filipino migrant laborers. They did so to challenge the increasingly prevalent image of Asian Americans during the mid- to late 1960s as "model minorities" and to reveal the intersections of race- and class-based discrimination.

However, this focus on the working-class tended to exclude the experiences of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Asian American women. Like many other immigrant groups, there was a gender delay between the migration of Asian men and women to the United States. The U.S. government passed a series of immigration exclusion laws over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that prevented Asians, unlike other groups, from entering the United States, just as these populations might have achieved greater gender parity. Furthermore, some pieces of legislation, most notably the Chinese Exclusion Act, privileged those from more elite classes (merchants, diplomats, travelers, and students) for admission into the country. For women who lacked a specified status of their own, their eligibility was determined based on that of their husbands or fathers. As a consequence, Chinese women of the working class, like Chinese men, were essentially denied entry at the U.S. borders between 1882 and the repeal of the Exclusion Act in 1943. The connection between gender and class was slightly different in the Japanese American community. Japanese laboring women were not necessarily targeted for restriction. However, a female migrant had greater likelihood for entry if she had family in the United States and if her husband or father could demonstrate his ability to financially maintain his "dependents" and prevent them from becoming public charges.² Yanagisako further argues that Asian American historians tended not to dwell on Japanese women who did successfully enter the United States. This oversight was partly a result of gender bias but also because of the field's desire to emphasize the working-class character of Asian America. Scholars focused on the successive waves of immigrant laborers and bypassed the lives of Japanese American women, some of whom helped to raise the class status of their families through their contributions to the household economy.

To complicate this portrait, Asian Americans who might have been considered middle class often found this status to be a tenuous one. Many experienced fluctuations in their status over the course of their lives. In addition, immigrants used a variety of strategies to circumvent what they perceived as unfair restrictions against their entry. So a "merchant's wife"

on paper may in fact have been a seamstress or a prostitute. Furthermore, the Asian American population has changed drastically over the course of the twentieth century and could be characterized more accurately as bimodal in its class structure. My point here is that a focus exclusively or even predominantly on working women's lives may result in the oversight of significant groupings of Asian American women and consequently mask the complex interplay of power dynamics. The field of Asian American women's history requires more studies that examine the lives of women both in and beyond the working class.³

Bennett not only critiques the emphasis on female worthies but also the shortened time frame of scholars interested in women's lives. As a scholar of modern U.S. history, I stand guilty of such a charge and found Bennett's discussion of the relevance of medieval European women's history very illuminating. At the same time, I question why she posits a connection between the growing interest in "non-Western histories [as well as racial and ethnic diversity within Western history] with our waning attention to the West's distant past" (40). Bennett does acknowledge that "this is not an either/or situation; we need *both* more non-Western history *and* more early history (and sometimes, of course, we get both at once)" (41).

Despite this qualification, Bennett's argument of why a distant past is historically important for present-minded scholars tends to rely on examples from her area of expertise. I would have found her argument more compelling had she chosen to expand her discussions to include "pre-modern" histories outside of the West. Does her discussion of the patriarchal equilibrium or the persistence of the wage gap still hold true if she had examined regions and cultures of the world outside of Europe? I recognize the value of comparing the European medieval world with present-day Western society, but what if one drew an alternative cultural lineage to another part of the world? In addition, what new questions or perspectives might be generated by conducting a cross-cultural comparative analysis of women's lives during the same period of time, including Bennett's era of expertise?

My final critique of Bennett concerns her analysis of how sexuality has been studied and named in more recent women's history. She argues that scholars have been politically gun-shy in avoiding the term "lesbian." She believes that it is necessary to use the word and to do so in a way that is historically contextualized and complex. In order to name "lesbianism" yet also destabilize this category, she proposes the concept of "lesbian-like" to refer to a variety of behaviors, emotions, and possible identifications. This concept, according to Bennett, gives her leeway to examine the lives of women who resisted marriage, dressed as men, worked as prostitutes, or had genital sex with other women. However, she warns that "lesbian-like"

is more useful in analyzing “practices” rather than “persons” or “motivational meanings” (119).

I support Bennett’s call to pay attention to and analyze a variety of non-heteronormative behaviors and identifications. However, is it necessary to designate these practices as “lesbian-like” in order to bring them into the historical limelight? Why not use queer or non-heteronormative or same-sex or homoerotic to characterize these behaviors?⁴ I disagree with Bennett’s insinuation that not using the term “lesbian” implies that one is knuckling under to heteronormative pressures. After all, even Bennett concedes that her concept of “lesbian-like” may in fact overlook lesbians, “particularly those who conformed to social norms” (119).

Historians of sexuality have wrestled with the difficulty of setting the bar of proof too high or alternatively casting the net too broadly in identifying homosexuals and homosexuality in the past. Bennett’s discussion points out the methodological difficulties of these efforts. However, she does not credit other scholars for seriously considering how they might approach their studies in a way that will more closely reflect their subjects’ behaviors and identities as well as satisfy the intellectual and political interests of their audience as well as themselves.

Early in her book, Judith Bennett reflects on her feminist practices of the 1970s: “As I look back now, I am amazed by some of the ‘truths’ I then held dear, embarrassed by the differences among women I then overlooked, and ashamed by some of the ways in which my certainties then oppressed other women” (4). She goes on to explain, though, that feminism, to her, still is relevant to history and that history is still relevant to feminism. I support her desire to bridge these two passions. However, the overall tone and argument of her book suggests that by positing a particular brand of feminism and a particular type of academic inquiry as the model for women’s historians, Bennett may be reproducing an undesirable aspect of her past political practices. As she herself demonstrates, what appears as the “golden age” to some feminist historians may be interpreted by others as the same old story of privilege and oppression.

NOTES

¹Sylvia Yanagisako, “Transforming Orientalism: Gender, Nationality, and Class in Asian American Studies,” in *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*, ed. Carol Delaney and Sylvia Yanagisako (New York: Routledge, 1995), 275–98.

²Jennifer Gee, “Housewives, Men’s Villages, and Sexual Responsibility: Gender and the Interrogation of Asian Women at the Angel Island Immigration Station,” in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 90–105.

³One notable example is Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), which analyzes how U.S. imperialism in the Philippines during the turn-of-the-nineteenth and twentieth centuries subsequently shaped the migration of Filipina nurses to the United States during the second half of the century.

⁴For more of my discussion about terminology and methodology in sexuality studies, please see Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, "Asian American History and Racialized Compulsory Deviance," a retrospective essay on Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 58–62.
