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Becoming a Transnational Historian

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I didn't set out to become a transnational historian, but then again, I'm not sure anyone did in the 1970s. My story begins with women's history. In 1969, after my first year at Bryn Mawr College and a summer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, studying French, where I first saw a poster for what was then called "Female Liberation," I found a name for what I had felt since I was a young girl: I was a feminist. I had already fallen in love with history, so the next step felt inevitable. I set my sights on women's history. I had started college thinking I would major in psychology or political science, but it was history that grabbed me.

I sometimes think it was because my beloved Aunt Leila was a high school history teacher, or because my family's history, from my mother's long and well-documented Quaker lineage to my father's stories about his grandfather fleeing military service in Germany and ending up fighting in the Civil War, were so much a part of my life. Probably because of the endless classes in U.S. history in high school—including a course I've never forgotten called "Foundations of American Culture" that started with the Greeks and wended its way to the clear pinnacle of perfection—I was drawn to European history. And to German history in particular, because having been born just five years after the end of the Second world War, I had the sense that one couldn't understand contemporary history without understanding Nazism and the Holocaust. With the support of my formidable yet supportive advisor, Barbara Miller Lane, I wrote my honors thesis on women in the labor force in Nazi Germany and applied to graduate schools to study German women's history.

The problem was, it wasn't exactly a thriving field in 1972. For whatever reason, I was naïve enough that I didn't understand that a faculty member would have to be interested in the work I wanted to do, and I suspect that played a role in my limited choices of graduate schools. To make a long story short, I ended up at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, stayed a year, had not a single woman professor or course in women's history, and felt totally unmoored. Only in retrospect did I realize how much it had meant to me to be at a women's college, how much I had taken for granted learning from women professors in a culture in which women really mattered. I knew I had to find a place to support my work, so I broached the idea of returning to Bryn Mawr's small Ph.D. program, since Barbara Lane, while not herself a women's historian or even, as far as I knew, a feminist, had been totally supportive of my work. I had also had a class with Mary Maples Dunn, who, like Barbara, was a marvelous teacher and role model, and I knew I could do a Ph.D. field in women's history with her. At that point, one could read all the existing literature on women's history, and most of it was on the United States, so comparative history was, implicitly, built into the field.

I was still planning on writing my dissertation on German women during the Second World War when I was working on an application for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in Women's Studies. And then I learned that a German historian, Dörte Winkler, was writing a book on that very topic.[1] I panicked. And then I realized that I was already interested in U.S. women

[1] Dörte Winkler, *Frauenarbeit im Dritten Reich* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, 1977).

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in the Second World War and could do a comparative study. And that's how my dissertation, which became *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945,* was born.[2] I have often said that it was the most important crisis-turned-opportunity in my life. I realized how much a comparison could reveal about the gendered assumptions and policies that went into shaping the female labor force in both countries. This was especially the case as what seemed at the outset to be a counterintuitive outcome—that the United States, without any kind of conscription of women, had bested Germany, which did pass legislation to mobilize women—became clear. I had few models for this kind of comparative history, although I still remember how provocative I found John Garraty's comparison of the policies and strategies of German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, published in the *American Historical Review*.[3]

I began to proclaim comparative history the wave of the future, but when I went on the job market, I realized that there was a problem. Put simply, there were no jobs in comparative history. At that point, I thought of myself more as a German than a U.S. historian, but I applied to jobs in both fields, and kept getting different variants of the same basic response: "Comparative history is great, but we are looking for a [German] [U.S.] historian." There were a few jobs in women's history, which I applied for eagerly, but even they were mostly in U.S. history. I was fortunate to land a year-long visiting position at the University of Pennsylvania, thanks to my advisors, where I enjoyed the freedom to teach across my areas of expertise.

And then came my big break. Ohio State University advertised a position in "women's history, U.S. or European," a joint position with women's studies, which was hiring its first faculty member. Imagine my delight when I applied for the job, but even more when I actually received the offer. The position did two things for me: allowed me to teach both European and U.S. women's history, and built up my experience with the interdisciplinary field of women's studies, which was still somewhat in its infancy.

That position gave me a home in more ways than one. Since I still felt more connected to German than U.S. history, if I had to put a geographical area to the field of women's history, it was my second major project, which, although not itself comparative, cut me loose from a particular national specialization. *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s,* coauthored with my partner, sociologist Verta Taylor, grew out of curiosity about how the Second World War affected women in the postwar years.[4] It was also the first of many joint research projects that have been a wonderful part of our relationship. Our research on the organizations and groups that fought for women's rights served as the basis for one of Verta's most cited articles, which used the case to develop the concept of the "abeyance structures" that sustain social movements in inhospitable political climates.[5] It is a concept I returned to later in my analysis of the International Committee for Sexual Equality, a small transnational group founded in Amsterdam in 1951 that

[2] Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

[3] John A. Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," *American Historical Review* 78:4 (October 1973): 907-944.

[4] Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[5] Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54:5 (October 1989), 761-775.

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connected the fledgling pre-war efforts to win equality for those with same-sex desires to the emergence of a global movement in the 1970s.[6]

We often talk about the symbiotic relationship between teaching and research, but in my case that was essential, and in both directions. It wasn't just that I brought my research to the classroom. It was that the first courses I taught—women's history in the Western world, world history, introduction to women's studies—shaped my research interests. My introductory history course assignments at Ohio State shifted from modern European history to U.S. history since 1877, and when our department launched a world history curriculum, I regularly team-taught with Ken Andrien, a Latin Americanist, an upper-level undergraduate course on twentieth century world history. Once I volunteered to team-teach an introductory course on world history since 1600, which consumed enormous amounts of time, given my focus on twentieth-century history. I remember spending weeks preparing one lecture explaining how a small insignificant place like Europe came to rule so much of the world, but it was this kind of shift of focus that prepared me to stretch way beyond what I had learned in graduate school. It was teaching world history that took me from comparative to transnational history, because thinking about global processes in the context of one of my main interests, women's movements, led me to *Worlds of Women.*[7]

I began researching what I then called the international women's movement in a near vacuum. From my work for *Survival in the Doldrums* on the U.S. National Woman's Party, I knew about the transnational struggle for equal rights, and from a chapter by Edith Hurwitz in the pioneering European women's history text edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, *Becoming Visible,* I learned about the International Council of Women and the International Alliance of Women.[8] There was little else beyond a few in-house histories and studies of national sections of transnational organizations. For the same reasons that it had been hard for me to apply for jobs—the structure of the discipline of history on the basis of the nation state—historians at that point still more or less left the scholarship on international organizations to political scientists. The only way I could imagine tackling a history of the transnational women's movement was through a focus on the central organizations that linked women across national borders. And that's the approach that I took.

At one of the "Big Berks" conferences of the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, I heard a paper by Dutch historian Mineke Bosch that introduced me to a big new part of the story and began a friendship that I cherish. Her book, published in Dutch, used letters to and from Dutch physician and feminist Aletta Jacobs to tell the story of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (later the International Alliance of Women) in the first half of the twentieth century.[9] Housed at what was then called the *Internationaal Informatiecentrum en Archief voor de Vrouwenbeweging* [International Information Center and Archive for the Women's Movement], Jacobs's papers are a veritable gold mine, revealing the centrality of Dutch women in the transnational women's movement. A sign of Jacobs' importance can be seen in the fact that the archives were later renamed Aletta, *Instituut voor vrouwengechiedenis* [Institute for Women's History].[10] Bosch's research

[6] Rupp, "The Persistence of Transnational Activism: The International Committee for Sexual Equality, *American Historical Review* 116:4 (October 2011), 1014-39.

[7] Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[8] Edith H. Hurwitz, "The International Sisterhood," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renata Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 325-345.

[9] Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman, *Lieve Dr. Jacobs: Brieven uit de Wereldbond voor Vrouwenkiesrecht, 1902-1942* (Amsterdam: Feministische Uitgeverij Sara, 1985). I worked to have this translated and published in English: Bosch and Kloosterman, *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902-1942* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990).

[10] Now known as Atria, Kennisinstituut voor Emancipatie en Vrouwengeschiedenis [Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History].

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led me to Amsterdam and beyond, introducing me to one of the joys of transnational research: travel to archives in a number of different countries.

As all of this suggests, concepts from women's history and women's studies influenced my work on *Worlds of Women* more than did scholarship on transnational history, although Benedict Anderson's iconic work on imagined communities, along with the voluminous literature on nationalism, helped me think about the construction of internationalism, and Akira Iriye's *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* influenced my presentation of the elements of international interaction.[11] Poststructuralist emphases on competing discourses, the dissolution of binary oppositions, and attention to the ways in which meaning is constructed in specific historical concepts led me to see conflict and community within the transnational women's movement not as opposites but as part of the same process by which women came together across national borders to create a sense of belonging. Cohesiveness grew from exclusiveness, and solidarity found expression in struggles over the best means of achieving broadly defined, and contested, goals of equality. From social movement scholars I drew on the concept of collective identity, developing a framework for the book consisting of boundaries, consciousness, and personalized politics, which together make up collective identity.[12] The interdisciplinarity of the field of feminist studies shaped my approach to transnational history in important ways.

Scholarship on transnational organizing among women, and transnational history more broadly, has flourished in the years since *Worlds of Women* appeared. We know more about the involvement of women outside the primarily white, elite, Christian, Euroamerican circles who dominated the major transnational organizations in the first half of the twentieth century.[13] And we know more about the story in the years after the Second World War, especially about the Women's International Democratic Federation, the left organization that emerged in the immediate postwar period and dwarfed in size and reach the older mainstream transnational groups.[14] All of this work sheds new light not only on the past but on our contemporary globalized world.

My most recent foray into global history shifted away from a focus on movements and involved no travel to archives. *Sapphistries* is what I admit is an audacious synthetic history of desire, sex, and love between women from the beginning of

[11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism,* revised edition (London: Verso, 1991); Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[12] Taylor and Nancy Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory,* eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 104-129.

[13] Joyce Blackwell, *No Peace Without Freedom: Race and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1975* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Blain and Tiffany Gill, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Mona L. Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms: The Global Battle for Women's Rights after the First World War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[14] Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organizations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* 19:4 (2010): 547-573; de Haan, "Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones: Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics," *Journal of Women's History* 25:4 (2013): 174-189; Yulia Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, The Global South, and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World?"* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

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recorded history to the present all around the globe.[15] Like my original turn to transnational history, this project grew out of the classroom. I was teaching a class I called Sapphistries that introduced students to the myriad of ways women around the world and throughout time expressed, acted on, and thought about same-sex desire. My students' interests encouraged me to delve more deeply into the topic as a way to historicize contemporary notions of women's sexual fluidity and to undermine the assumption of progress from the bad old days of repression and invisibility to the liberated Western present. I learned a lot from the research of historians and social scientists that helped me craft a complicated story of same-sex desire, love, and sex between women.

I think the most important thing I learned in my journey to becoming a transnational historian is how profoundly the picture changes as one moves farther away from a particular locality. In a microhistory, every detail is important in creating a story that has larger implications. In a transnational or global history, it is the big differences and similarities that matter. I am grateful to the scholars and mentors who facilitated my move from a focus on national history to comparative history to transnational and global history. There is a certain amount of insecurity that comes with the ride since I am no longer an expert in any one particular thing. But we need all angles of vision on our past in order to understand it as thoroughly as possible.

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[15] Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

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