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*Nationalist Historiography, Feminist Scholarship, and the
Promise and Problems of New Transnational Histories:
The Australian Case*

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History, as has often been noted, made its career as a handmaiden to the nation-state. Both enterprises—history and the nation-state—spoke to, and privileged, men's ambitions, interests, desires, and fantasies. History was, as often as not, the record of men's public work of nation-building—through parliaments, politics, commerce, and war. History shaped national identities by construing past experience as a record of collective national endeavor, exemplified in revolution and reform, exploration and settlement, wars against nature, natives, and foreign neighbors. In reality, women had also been writing history, in a multitude of genres, as Mary Spongberg and her co-editors and contributors to the Palgrave *Companion to Women's Historical Writing* (2005) have made amply clear, but such historical writing was mostly not recognized as real history and rarely taught in universities—or understood in the public domain—as national history.¹

When women's liberationists began, in the 1970s, to demand representation in the historical record, as in political assemblies, they mostly focused on documenting women's contribution to the national story. In Australia, especially, early women's liberationist texts—by Anne Summers, Bev Kingston, Edna Ryan and Ann Conlon, and Miriam Dixson—targeted not patriarchy in general, but the fictions and fantasies of our particular national history, which had celebrated such men's achievements and masculinist mythologies as mateship and Gallipoli.² The titles of the Australian books reflected the contemporary preoccupation in the 1970s with national identity and women's place in the nation, past and present. So exclusionary was the national identity deemed to be that Australian women—who had in fact been the first in the world to win the right to stand for their national parliament in 1902—had come to feel, according to Miriam Dixson, that they were "Doormats of the Western World."³ National history—that is national historical writing and myth-making—was blamed for this sorry condition.

Thus national history became a contested domain and prime site of battle. Women, like other groups positioned as "outsider/insiders," such as Aboriginal Australians, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians, claimed that they had been marginalized—or simply excluded—from the national story, although Aboriginal women also made the point that white women were not in fact "the colonized," as historian Anne Summers had suggested,

but the “colonizers,” a vital element in the imperial/national enterprise of conquest and colonization.⁴ White women historians have since had to recognize and rethink their complex national condition as both ruling race and subordinated sex.⁵ The writings of such Aboriginal women as Pat O’Shane and Jackie Huggins in the 1970s and 1980s were important in pointing to the perceived whiteness of feminism.⁶ For Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian women, history was central to their contemporary mobilizations and political claims.

In 1994, four feminist historians—Pat Grimshaw, Ann McGrath, Marian Quartly, and myself—extended our engagement with national history by publishing a feminist version of national history, *Creating a Nation*, which aimed to provide a feminist rendering of national experience—focusing on relations of reproduction, as well as production—and also providing an account in which the colonial dispossession and destruction of Aboriginal peoples and cultures were central to the story.⁷ The book was generally well received (and has been republished in a revised and updated edition in 2006), but our intervention provoked outrage on the part of some male custodians of national history, notably, John Hirst, coeditor of *The Companion to Australian History*, who rushed into print in a two-page article entitled “Is Feminist History Bunk?” in the national newspaper, the *Weekend Australian*, to tell us that women should stick to family history, because it was mostly men who had defined, built, and defended the nation.⁸ *Creating a Nation* was clearly subversive of vested interests, but in contesting masculinist versions of national history, we were also subject to their constraints and conceits, the primary conceit being that past experience could be best comprehended in a national frame of analysis.

When researching my next major project—a history of feminism in Australia—it soon became clear to me that if I were to understand feminists’ ideas and strategies, their aspirations and victories, as well as the ambiguities of their achievements and the tensions in their thinking, then I must locate them in the transnational community of which they were a part and pursue them on their travels beyond Australia to London, Geneva, Paris, Rome, San Francisco, and New York. Despite the difficulty and duration of travel by boat and rail in the 1920s and 1930s, these women drew inspiration from international encounters in ways that distinguished their experiences from those of their male counterparts, who became political leaders in national politics.⁹

For, although Australian women had won the right to representation in the national parliament in 1902, they found it singularly difficult to access parliamentary power. The male-dominated system of party politics that was organized around the conflict between labor and capital ensured that women were never preselected for winnable seats, or if standing as

Independent candidates, unable to win against the combined forces of conservatives and labor parties. In international forums, women found a voice alongside others who shared their passions and priorities, if not always their political orientations—to socialism or to equal rights, for example. Differences between feminists between the wars often arose over their attitude to motherhood—whether it should be regarded as a merely private matter or the focus of maternalist policy development. These differences came into focus in international encounters and positions were sometimes revised, or awkwardly combined, in response to argument and counterargument.

Feminists working internationally also won significant historic victories and achievements, notably the reconceptualization of the rights of man as human rights at meetings in the 1930s and changes to the draft charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at San Francisco. These stories of transnational political mobilization are still largely unknown, but their activism has been recovered and published in the appropriately titled collection *Women's Rights as Human Rights* following an international feminist history conference in Melbourne in 1998.¹⁰

It seems to me that there are parallels between the international engagements of earlier generations of feminists from the 1890s through the 1940s and our own international scholarly engagements at such conferences as the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. Feminist scholarship is an international enterprise, and feminism has a transnational history. Australian feminist historians have participated in international exchanges and networks to a much greater extent than our male academic colleagues, who still dominate, and act as custodians of national history at home. Men retain a huge investment in the national domain—in national politics and history—which suggests that, despite globalization, there is still significant power in the nation-state.

Yet the inadequacy of a national frame of analysis for historical research is clear. This was again evident when I researched the history of campaigns for Aboriginal rights for a biography of Black activist Faith Bandler. Bandler's father was a Pacific Islander, a so-called Kanaka, recruited to labor in the sugar cane fields of northern Queensland in the late nineteenth century. In their lifelong activism against racial discrimination, her family identified with black Americans and their history of slavery and subsequent fight for freedom. They subscribed to the publications of the NAACP and worshipped Paul Robeson, whom Bandler met at Sydney airport, when he first visited Australia, in 1960.¹¹

Similarly, Ann Curthoys's book on the New South Wales Freedom Ride, in which she participated as a student, also draws attention to the importance of Martin Luther King, the U.S. Freedom Rides of the 1960s, and antisegregation battles in South Africa as inspirations to Australian student

activism in the 1960s. The work of Aboriginal historian John Maynard on the importance of Marcus Garvey's ideas to Maynard's grandfather's campaigns for Aboriginal rights in Sydney in the early decades of the twentieth century also points to the importance of the transnational circulation of knowledge and political inspiration.¹² It is clear that groups subordinated by national political processes have often felt empowered through engagement in transnational political movements, such as movements for indigenous land rights.

In Australia, feminist historical scholarship has been revitalized through its recognition of and engagement with a transnational past. In October 2004, Curthoys and I organized a symposium on transnational history, its possibilities and pitfalls, at the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra. It was a very lively event, attracting in particular younger women scholars and papers on topics ranging from the mobilities of modernity, the rise of the oceans in historiography, the transnational dynamics of the film industry and romantic love, and the universality of the emotions.¹³

A quick survey of the papers presented by Australian historians at the 2005 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women gives an indication of the enlivening nature of the transnational turn: Rae Frances on the transnational history of sex workers, Sarah Paddle on colonial encounters in China, Fiona Paisley on the glamor of the Pacific, Alison Bashford on the intellectual history of world health, Kirsten McKenzie on the opportunities and opportunism of empire, Marg Allen and Jane Haggis on communities of missionaries across India, Britain, and Australia, and so on. Much, if not all, of this work, locates itself in a postcolonial critique of empire which has of itself done much to break down the border controls of national historiographies—thanks to Antoinette Burton and others.¹⁴

And yet, there are risks as well as benefits in this turn away from national history. The women's liberation movement, as I noted at the beginning of this article, focused much of its attack on national histories and mythologies as an oppressive force. But they engaged in the critique and offered their own version of national history in order to engage a national audience and nation-state in a political struggle with the aim of bringing into being a more woman-friendly state that subsidized child care, women's health centers, and refuges; provided support for victims of rape and incest; and legislated against sex and race discrimination and sexual harassment. They wanted a state that enacted affirmative action, equal pay, and equal opportunity in the workplace.

All these things could be achieved through state action on the part of the leftist, progressive state and federal governments that governed Australia in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist history targeted the nation-state

in order to force it to change. Many feminist historians in Australia subsequently took work as so-called "femocrats" in the various bureaucracies that introduced these programs and many also secured academic appointments in universities, in history departments as well as in the numerous women's studies programs that proliferated around the country in the 1980s.¹⁵ Such historians as Judith Allen, Ann Curthoys, Patricia Grimshaw, Susan Magarey, and Jill Matthews were at the forefront in the establishment of these programs. Others, such as Lyndall Ryan, a historian of Aboriginal Australia, worked as both femocrat and academic. By the 1990s, several feminist historians had been appointed to chairs in history departments and elected to both the Academies of Humanities and Social Sciences. Many more hold positions at junior levels. One reason for this achievement was feminists' ready engagement with national concerns and their success in addressing a national audience.

Clearly, many of us who now undertake and advocate transnational, comparative, or world histories believe that our work has progressive political implications—not least in breaking down mentalities of border protection that demonize and criminalize a large number of asylum seekers in many countries. It would seem to be self-evidently progressive to document the interconnections of countries and the historical processes and relationships that have joined peoples around the world.

Yet, as activists and historians, it is important to remember that nation-states are still the jurisdictions that enact legislation to determine peoples' rights as asylum seekers and refugees, Aboriginal access to land rights, citizens' levels of welfare and well being, and working conditions and wage rates. It is primarily within the domain of the nation-state that policies can be influenced and political change effected. As feminist historians, we need to think about our audience, identify for whom we write and why, and target whom we desire to influence and to what end.

NOTES

¹Mary Spongberg, Ann Curthoys, and Barbara Caine, eds., *Companion to Women's Historical Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

²Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1975); Bev Kingston, *My Wife My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann: Women and Work in Australia* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1975); Edna Ryan and Ann Conlon, *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788–1974* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1975); Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788–1975* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1976).

³Dixson, *The Real Matilda*.

⁴Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*. In editions of the book subsequent to 1976 the subtitle was dropped.

⁵See, for example, Ann Curthoys, "Identity Crisis: Colonialism, Nation and Gender in Australian History," *Gender and History* 5, no. 2 (1993): 165–76; Marilyn Lake, "Between Old World 'Barbarism' and Stone Age 'Primitivism': The Double Difference of the White Australian Feminist," in *Australian Women Contemporary Feminist Thought*, ed. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 80–91; Marilyn Lake, "The Ambiguities for Feminists of National Belonging: Race and Gender in the Imagined Australian Community," in *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, and Catherine Hall (London: Berg, 2000), 159–78; Patricia Grimshaw, "Federation as a Turning Point in Australian History," in "Challenging Histories," special issue, *Australian Historical Studies* 118 (2002): 25–41.

⁶Pat O'Shane, "Is There Any Relevance in the Women's Movement for Aboriginal Women?" *Refractory Girl* 12 (1976): 31–34; Jackie Huggins, "A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women's Relationship to the White Women's Movement," in Grieve and Burns, *Australian Women*, 70–79; see also Aileen Moreton-Robinson's later work *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

⁷Patricia Grimshaw, et al., *Creating a Nation* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1994, 1996, 2000).

⁸Patricia Grimshaw, et al., *Creating a Nation* (Perth: API Network, Curtin University Press, 2006); John Hirst, "Is Feminist History Bunk?" *Weekend Australian*, 14 March 1994, 10–11; Graeme Davison, John Hirst, and Stuart Macintyre, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁹Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Feminism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999).

¹⁰Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

¹¹Marilyn Lake, *FAITH: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2002).

¹²Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2002); for Maynard's work and Australian feminist transnational work more generally, see Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2006).

¹³See Curthoys and Lake, eds., *Connected Worlds*.

¹⁴Antoinette Burton, ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Antoinette Burton, ed., *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing Home, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁵Hester Eisenstein, *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996); Sophie Watson, ed., *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990); Marian Sawer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990); Susan Magarey, Lyndall Ryan, and Sue Sheridan, "Women's Studies in Australia," in Grieve and Burns, *Australian Women*, 285–95; Lyndall Ryan, "Women's Studies," in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine (Oxford University Press, 1998), 365–69.
