BOOK REVIEW

Pamela S. Nadell and Kate Haulman, eds. *Making Women’s Histories: Beyond National Perspectives*. New York, NY: New York UP, 2013.

BY LEANDRA ZARNOW
University of Houston, Texas

In the early twenty-first century, women’s history has evolved from a field fresh on the scene to one of stature, sophistication, and vitality. At this intellectual crossroads, pioneer women’s historians working in pockets throughout the globe have begun to commemorate their life’s work, reminiscing as they instruct others to carry on this politically infused scholarship. In kind, scholars just coming into the fold remain attentive to preserving and sustaining first works just as they theorize and generate a broader conception of women’s history. *Making Women’s Histories* takes stock of this transitional moment using a multinational lens. Editors Pamela S. Nadell and Kate Haulman ambitiously set out to map “the intellectual and political production of women’s history across time and space” (1). They draw together a broad set of historiographical and historical essays that demonstrate how locational specificity mattered more than global developments and transnational interactions in framing women’s historical study. At once nostalgic and critical, affective and balanced, this collection should be required reading for all scholars entering the field and also offers seasoned historians a modus operandi for self-reflection.

It goes without saying that a romance is underway between the North American academy and the world. Nadell and Haulman speak to this globalizing trend, yet they are also attentive to how easily scholars have fallen into using the terms transnational, international, comparative, and global interchangeably. Avoiding this form of sloppiness, their corrective comes by way of example, selecting essays that although “not internally transnational or comparative, when read together . . . generate transnational comparisons and contrasts” (2). Contributor Jocelyn Olcott brings
greater precision to the term, defining transnational history in contrast to comparative history as “those phenomena that transcend the boundaries of nations and regions by means other than state-to-state (or international) interactions” (238). While most essays in this collection are nation-bound, they venture toward the transnational when considering how economic, religious, and political systems—imperialism, Christianity, Communism, neoliberalism—and activist impulses—feminism, anti-colonialism, nationalism—influenced local scholars’ temporal, thematic, and theoretical focus. Women’s historians operated in regional comfort zones, but within these seemingly impenetrable spaces, they exhibited a degree of unboundedness born out of the common cause of advancing women’s societal status. Nonetheless, Nadell and Haulman are correct to remind women’s historians that they too have participated in nationalist projects, have upheld race, class, and sex hierarchies, and have yet to fully acknowledge rights movements’ mixed results for women.

The first of three sections, “Imagining New Histories: Late-Twentieth Century Trajectories,” takes readers to three locales—the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Africa—to explore how feminist organizing from the 1960s on compelled women historians to unearth a useable past. In an opening article, Kathy Peiss draws on personal history to demonstrate how U.S. historians specializing in other areas “learn[ed] women’s history on the fly” (17). Peiss outlines familiar conceptual turns: from women’s history to gender and intersectionality in the 1980s, to postmodernist deconstruction of the state and the body in the 1990s, and now the transnational moment. And yet, she looks at this trajectory with fresh purpose, calling on historians to “recognize ourselves as subjects constituted in discourse, to be historians who are not autonomous agents creating narratives but who are, rather, effects of them” (32). Answering Peiss’s call, Barbara Alpern Engel brings to light how Cold War politics framed early Russian and Soviet women’s histories. Working on this side of the Iron Curtain, Engel was first inspired to research Russian women’s radicalism through her engagement in Marxist-oriented women’s liberation groups. Compared to Americanists, Soviet specialists came later to social history and were limited by access to sources until the “remarkable efflorescence following the collapse of the Soviet Union” (56). Claire Robertson notes Africanists’
adept usage of oral history and interdisciplinary techniques to overcome women’s silence in the record and the field’s unreceptiveness to gender analysis. While first histories considered the labor in political economy, by the 1990s, emphasis turned to women’s political organizing and the coercive and expressive functions of law and the state. As a “white middle-class Midwestern American,” Robertson ultimately makes a case for non-African contributors to this field that, she suggests, has room for the “insider and outsider” (84).

Historical documentation and myth making remains a prominent part of nationalizing projects. This collection’s second section, “Engendering National and Nationalist Projects,” considers this uncomfortable truth, exploring how women’s historians have complied with and advanced imperialist and nationalist aims. “As scholars we are not yet beyond the nation,” Nadell and Haulman acknowledge, “instead we are interrogating its products, and one of them is women’s history” (11). Authors Arianne Chernock, Lisa Pollard, and Mytheli Sreenivas examine this critical point, while demonstrating women historians’ significant role in shifting emphasis toward postcolonial critique of aggrandizing and disempowering colonial history. Most creative among them, Chernock calls for a reevaluation of discarded histories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British “women worthies,” asserting study of how these women harnessed status and power reveals much about Britishness, rights, and the nation. Pollard analyzes amateur historians’ turn of the century reverence of “Lady Egypt,” exhibiting unsurprisingly the ways in which women were used as a colonial trope, but also in discourse challenging British occupation. Sreenivas documents the flourishing of Indian women’s history in the 1980s within India and in the West. She also traces out a broad outline for future research in areas including: religious persecution, violence, sexuality, neoliberalism, social movements, and the post-independence period.

In closing, “Exploring Transnational Approaches” expressly considers the efficacy of bringing transnational perspectives and methodologies to women’s and gender history. Using Latin American history as an example, Ulrike Strasser and Heidi Tinsman contemplate how world history and masculinity studies would benefit from cross-pollination. Labor, the family, modernization, state power, and the legacy of colonialism all would look
different through this union. Likewise, Cristina Zaccarini considers why diplomatic historians’ attention to U.S.–China relations has been largely void of gender analysis. She hopes recent attention to Christian missionaries, Chinese healers, and “informal diplomats” (220) will serve as a corrective catalyst. Last, Jocelyn Olcott offers the most theoretically sophisticated contribution to this collection in an article that casts a critical gaze on the development of transnational feminist history. She asserts that recent historical interest in the United Nations International Women’s Year conferences and like international gatherings has not created a significant paradigm shift. Nonetheless, study of transnational feminism requires historians to rethink “how to map them [feminists] without either reifying or eliding meaningful differences of power and resources” (244). As Olcott makes clear, the politics of place is a potential destabilizing force in transnational feminist alliances, just as “postcolonial cosmopolitans” (246) are privileged in their mobility and not freed of home influences.

Together, the essays in *Making Women’s Histories* achieve what Olcott imagines for transnational feminist history, pointing the way toward “a different frame to central analytics such as time, space, subjectivity, and structure” (253). This collection stands out for its synergy between authors, who take care to engage with each other across the pages, and in kind, across regional divides. Equally important, individual authors are attentive to how international scholars have contributed to the development of women’s history in a variety of regional specializations. However, this book was written by U.S.-based historians for U.S.-based historians. What would this collection look like if it not only went “beyond national perspectives,” but was a truly international intellectual project? My hope is that others will find *Making Women’s Histories* a worthy stimulus for this global enterprise.