

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



This Bridge Called Women's Stories: Private Lore and Public History

Elizabeth Jameson

Volume 18, numéro 2, 2007

Global Histories
Histoires mondiales

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018231ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018231ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)
1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Jameson, E. (2007). This Bridge Called Women's Stories: Private Lore and Public History. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(2), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018231ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article trace les réalisations et les défis qui restent à relever dans le cadre du projet amorcé il y a quatre décennies visant à intégrer l'expérience des femmes dans l'histoire « conventionnelle ». L'auteur utilise sa propre expérience en tant qu'historienne ainsi qu'une analyse de la façon dont les femmes ont été incluses dans six sondages de l'histoire récente (deux canadiens, deux américains, deux de l'ouest américain). Des progrès considérables ont été réalisés dans l'inclusion des femmes; toutefois, les catégories d'analyse utilisées dans les histoires axées sur l'État limitent les conditions de leur inclusion. Les progrès à ce jour suggèrent également des stratégies permettant d'accroître l'inclusion des femmes ainsi que l'incorporation du genre comme catégorie centrale de l'histoire de l'expérience humaine.

This Bridge Called Women's Stories: Private Lore and Public History*

ELIZABETH JAMESON

Abstract

This article traces the achievements and remaining challenges of the project, begun some four decades ago, to integrate women's experience into "mainstream" history. The author uses her own experience as a women's historian as well as an analysis of how women have been included in six recent history survey texts (two Canadian, two U.S., two American West). Considerable progress has been made in including women; however, the categories of analysis used in state-centred histories limit the terms of their inclusion. The progress to date also suggests strategies for expanding women's inclusion, and incorporating gender as a central category of human historical experience.

Résumé

Cet article trace les réalisations et les défis qui restent à relever dans le cadre du projet amorcé il y a quatre décennies visant à intégrer l'expérience des femmes dans l'histoire « conventionnelle ». L'auteur utilise sa propre expérience en tant qu'historienne ainsi qu'une analyse de la façon dont les femmes ont été incluses dans six sondages de l'histoire récente (deux canadiens, deux américains, deux de l'ouest américain). Des progrès considérables ont été réalisés dans l'inclusion des femmes; toutefois, les catégories d'analyse utilisées dans les histoires axées sur l'État limitent les conditions de leur inclusion. Les progrès à ce jour suggèrent également des stratégies permettant d'accroître l'inclusion des femmes ainsi que l'incorporation du genre comme catégorie centrale de l'histoire de l'expérience humaine.

* Thanks to Amy McKinney, research assistant extraordinaire, and to Erin Millions, for help quantifying the texts. Thanks to the Canadian Women's Studies Association for sponsoring the keynote that generated this essay and to the Canadian Historical Association for co-sponsoring. Thanks to the anonymous reviewers who made helpful suggestions for the transition to print. Thanks most of all to Lynda Ross for instigating by inviting me to speak to the CWSA and for undertaking all the logistical and administrative work that made it happen.

The first bridge I crossed was the causeway that connected Galveston Island, where I grew up, to the Texas mainland.¹ In my first memory of that bridge I am about four. I am sitting, hot, sweaty, and bored, in the back seat of my family's green Hudson sedan, in the steaming heat of a Gulf Coast summer. We sit parked, immobile, on the causeway. The drawbridge is up, as it was whenever a ship needed to pass. We knew one of the drawbridge tenders. His name, I swear, was Butch Savage. The only time he'd make the ship wait was for a medical emergency, if a woman was in labour or an ambulance needed to get to the hospital on the island. Otherwise, the drawbridge came up and no one moved.

We could have been going lots of places that hot summer day — you had to cross the causeway to go almost anywhere. For the sake of metaphor, let's say we were going, as we sometimes did, to the San Jacinto battleground, where, in 1836, Sam Houston led his army to victory over Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's army, to win Texas' independence from Mexico. We'd visit the battleground and the monument, maybe have dinner at the San Jacinto Inn, where they served the world's best biscuits, then pile in the car and cross the causeway back home.

From kindergarten through my B.A. in history there might as well have been a raised drawbridge between the island of home and the public sites of history. There might as well have been some guy named Butch Savage patrolling the gap between public history and private lore, separating the stories of battles, dates, and kings from women, people of colour, workers, and daily life. In my grade school library I did find a few women's biographies, slim orange volumes about pioneer professionals such as Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, writers such as Julia Ward Howe and Louisa May Alcott, wives of Presidents such as Abigail Adams, and one Signature Classic about Queen Elizabeth I. Women had pretty much disappeared from the library by junior high. Of all the women in my grade school biographies, only Abigail Adams and Queen Elizabeth made it into my history books. History was the story of Texas and the United States, of nations and states, politics and wars. I encountered social history in college, and the startling notion that history could be about "ordinary" people and social movements. A few women showed up briefly in classes on Victorian England and the anti-slavery movement and in stories of the sexual practices of utopian communities.

I was lucky to enter graduate school in 1970, to find the women's movement and feminist colleagues, to work with some amazing, often isolated, feminist scholars with whom we fortunate students began to imagine women's

1 The topic of this essay, the title, and the use of bridge imagery was prompted by the theme of the 76th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, 26 May – 2 June 2007: "Bridging Communities: Making public knowledge — Making knowledge public."

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

history and women's studies. In my first year of graduate school I resented being assigned what I called the "women and" papers — about Margaret Fuller, the leading American intellectual of the nineteenth century, and Kate Chopin, whose literature was just being rediscovered.² Then I got engrossed. One day, standing in the History Department, I told a friend I was really getting into women's history. An eminent historian stuck his head out his office door and intoned: "Women's history? Why, that's just the history of dishwashing!"

My first reaction was anger. He meant, of course, that women had always done the same trivial things and were therefore unchanging, ahistorical. Women, I fumed, had done the same things men had: they had thought great thoughts, fought political battles, worked professionally. But the remark rankled. After several months of fuming I decided he was right: women's history *is* in large measure the history of dishwashing, if by dishwashing we mean domestic labour, physically and socially reproducing human beings, the daily work of transmitting culture, of forging human relationships or changing behaviours to alter them. Gerda Lerner called this the first challenge of women's history: "the assertion that women *have* a history, and that this history has been obscured and misunderstood because of the patriarchal values that pervade our culture and our ideas."³

So began the yet-unfinished project of recovering women's lives and women's stories. A generation of feminist scholarship has spanned academic discourses, the personal and the political, private lore and public history. It has always been a collective endeavour. Nothing I say will seem terribly new to women's historians. When I speak personally, I do not intend to be egocentric or to privilege the American history that is my own starting point, but to offer one memory of a common journey.

First, we had to lower the drawbridge that separated women from history. The first steps connected women to a well-travelled past and slotted them initially into the categories of inherited histories. To histories of great men, we added great women — the exceptional women of my biographies and seminar papers who had achieved in male-dominated arenas of public power and public culture. We added women's contributions to the institutions of textbook

2 Fuller's many accomplishments included writing the first work of American feminist theory, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, and editing the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. S. Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845). The intellectual historian Perry Miller called her the leading nineteenth-century intellectual in the United States. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (Chicago: H.S. Stone, 1899) was just being rediscovered in the early 1970s.

3 Gerda Lerner, "The Challenge of Women's History," based on a lecture delivered at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Paepcke Auditorium, Aspen, Colorado, 25 August 1977, and published in Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 168-80; quote, 169.

histories: to unions, theatres, art museums, legislatures, armies. Schooled in political history, we wrote women's histories as struggles for political rights such as suffrage and the right, as persons, to hold public office.⁴ These stories offered female heroes. They analyzed the institutions and discourses that marginalized even exceptional women, and addressed the significance for women of state power and state services; they have illuminated the processes by which women moved from concerns for others to organize for women's rights.

Putting women into inherited histories inevitably stretched the categories and assumptions of those familiar frameworks. A stunning example was Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties*, which did far more than "add" women to the story of the fur trade. It placed women's labour, domesticity, relationships of social reproduction, and the linked categories of race and gender at the centres of history.⁵ Sarah Carter, Peggy Pascoe, Veronica Strong-Boag, Adele Perry, Sheila McManus, Myra Rutherdale, and many others have gone on to document how controlling and policing relationships of race and gender, marriage and inheritance, were essential to colonial projects, state formation, and boundary maintenance.⁶ Still, it is possible to gender the state and see women as actors in key encounters without directly engaging most women's lives.

The creation of women's history and women's studies — all the scholarship of the last generation — these have been huge achievements. Women now are central subjects in women's history texts and women's studies classrooms — but not beyond, not in History-with-a-capital-H. This essay is an attempt to think about how we might begin to move women to the centres of collectively claimed histories.

4 For a discussion of this process, see for instance Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," in Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 145-159, esp. 145-8. An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the Second Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, 1974. It was originally published in *Feminist Studies* III, nos. 1&2 (Fall 1975): 5-14.

5 Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980).

6 See for example Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in the Canadian West* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); Sarah Carter, "The Exploitation and Narration of the Captivity of Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock, 1885," in *Making Western Canada*, eds. Catherine Cavanaugh and Jeremy Mouat (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1996), 31-61; Peggy Pascoe, "Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage," *Frontiers* 12, no. 1 (1991): 5-18; Veronica Strong-Boag, Grace Sherill, Avigail Eisenberg, and Joan Anderson, eds., *Painting the Maple: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Construction of Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Sheila McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Men's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

In the beginning, it seemed simpler, a matter of going to the library and finding the sources to add women to history. When I assisted the first women's history course at the University of Michigan in 1972, I was assigned a lecture on "Colonial Women and Work." In the graduate library I found Alice Earle Morse's classic *Colonial Dames and Good Wives*, published in 1895.⁷ I had to cut the pages. The assumption that women were private and trivial, men public and consequential, left Morse sitting unopened on the library shelf for seventy-seven years.

About the same time that I found Morse, sociologist Alice Rossi spoke at the university about her research on American feminists in the 1830s and 1840s, and about the marriage of anti-slavery and women's rights crusaders Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld.⁸ Angelina Grimké and her sister Sarah, daughters of South Carolina slave owners, wrote and lectured against slavery from 1835-1838. Angelina drew disapproval for insisting on women's right to speak on moral issues; for speaking in public to the Massachusetts legislature and to "promiscuous" mixed audiences of women and men; and for suggesting that Northerners needed to attend to their own race prejudice. Historian Gilbert Barnes wrote in 1957 that this controversy resolved when Theodore Weld married Angelina Grimké, after which Angelina and Sarah retired to their properly private domestic sphere in the Welds' New Jersey home.⁹ Weld remained a public activist, gone for long periods directing anti-slavery petition campaigns and lobbying in Washington.

Twice, though, in the winter of 1843 and in January 1844, Weld went home to New Jersey, refusing all pleas from abolitionist and political leaders to return to the capitol. Barnes interpreted this refusal as the acts of a humble man who did not want his personality to overshadow the moral crusade. Rossi told a different story. In the winter of 1842-1843, Angelina suffered a miscarriage; in January, 1844 she was in the seventh month of a difficult pregnancy. Rossi suggested that Theodore Weld came home to be with his wife.¹⁰

7 Alice Earle Morse, *Colonial Dames and Good Wives* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895).

8 Rossi spoke as part of a lecture series sponsored by the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education for Women during 1971-1972. The papers from that series were published in Dorothy Gies McGuigan, ed., *A Sampler of Women's Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Continuing Education of Women, 1973). This account comes largely from my memory of Rossi's lecture, with references to her book then in progress, especially the sections on the Grimké sisters: Alice S. Rossi, "Introduction: Social Roots of the Women's Movement in America," and "From Abolition to Sex Equality: Sarah Grimké (1792-1873) and Angelina Grimké (1805-1879)," in *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 241-322.

9 Rossi referred to Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse 1830-1833* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1957), 158; see also Rossi, "Introduction," 288.

10 Rossi, "Introduction," 293-4. Rossi acknowledged her debt to Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).

Nor did Angelina Grimké abandon her moral and political passions at the altar. She was concerned about the medical opinion and popular belief that public lecturing would make her an “unfit” woman; she thought her domestic competence proved that public acts did not damage women. The sisters and Weld ran a boarding school that educated the children of many abolitionists. The women taught French and history, and did the domestic work for the students, as well as for the three Weld children. Angelina Grimké Weld continued to act from moral passions; Theodore Weld made professional choices for personal and private reasons.¹¹

Their story challenged the assumption, largely unexamined in 1970s academia, that men’s choices were always public and professional, women’s private and family centred. The enduring power of those assumptions was suggested by the titles of two papers in the 2007 Canadian Women’s Studies Association conference program: “‘People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones’: How the Treatment of Mothers in the Academy Compromises Critical Research,” and “‘Don’t worry; you can slip one in between your thesis and your comps’: Unanticipated Consequences of Having a Baby in Graduate School.”¹² Feminist historians such as Linda Gordon, Joan Sangster, Nancy Janovicek, Karen Dubinsky, and many others have linked women’s private concerns such as clean water, domestic violence, rape, sexuality, and divorce, to public activism and public policy, documenting how the personal is both political and historical.¹³

Just as Angelina Grimké challenged abolitionists to confront their own race prejudice, feminist historians soon confronted our own biases that wrote into women’s histories the assumptions of whiteness, heterosexism, class privilege, and patriarchal history. The raised drawbridge on my causeway separated a public highway. If you followed it fifty miles to Houston, you’d pass oil refiner-

11 See Rossi, “Introduction,” 290-6.

12 Program of Canadian Women’s Studies Association, 76th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, 26 May – 2 June 2007, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Panel: “Being a Mother in Academe”: Kim Morrison, “‘People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones’: How the Treatment of Mothers in the Academy Compromises Critical Research”; Serena Patterson, “‘Don’t worry; you can slip one in between your thesis and your comps’: Unanticipated Consequences of Having a Baby in Graduate School.”

13 Linda Gordon, *Heroes of their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (Boston: 1988); Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920-1960* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nancy Janovicek, *No Place to Go: Local Histories of the Battered Women’s Shelter Movement* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Nancy Janovicek, “‘If it saves one life, all the effort ... is worthwhile’: Women’s Organizing Against Wife Abuse, Moncton, 1979-1987,” *Acadiensis* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 27-45, and “‘Assisting Our Own’: Urban Migration, Self Governance, and Native Women’s Organizing in Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1972-1989,” *American Indian Quarterly* 27, nos. 3 & 4 (Summer/Fall 2003): 548-65; Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago, 1993).

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

ies, dairies and truck farms, impossibly green rice fields, and the burgeoning bedroom suburbs of the 1950s. If you followed it south past the port of Galveston to the east end of Galveston Island you reached our home, a private space that became a workplace every day for Ruby Mae Robinson, Mabel Wynn, or Elnora Palmer, the African American women who cared for my sister, brothers, and me while my mother practiced medicine. The farmers, longshoremen, and refinery workers, the suburban housewives and domestic wage workers did not fit the categories of standard histories or the standard historical periodization that divided human history by wars, conquests, revolutions, elections, or vast cultural shifts. My childhood history textbooks mentioned the American Civil War. They did not connect that war with the legacy of racism that segregated southern classrooms, or with the combined legacies of race and class and gender that brought African American women to care for white children and that segregated the labour of dishwashing and childrearing from history itself.

Two texts spoke vividly to the challenges of making those connections, of imagining inclusive histories. In 1981 Kitchen Table Press published Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's pathbreaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.¹⁴ The title speaks to the power of public knowledge to exclude knowledge by and about women and people of colour; it speaks to the personal toll of bridging social boundaries. The publisher, Kitchen Table Press, locates a domestic site of resistance. Donna Kate Rushin's "Bridge Poem" introduced the volume:

I've had enough
I'm sick and tired of seeing and touching
Both sides of things
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

. . . .

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the Black separatists
to the artists the artists to my friends' parents. . .

Then
I've got to explain myself
To everybody I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

14 Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981).

Forget it

...

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful¹⁵

Building bridges to women's own lives required a more diverse cast, divided by race and class, sexuality, and nationality. The task shifted from adding women to history, to adding enough *different* women to show the power relations among us. The expanded cast called for new stories. In her forward to the second edition of *This Bridge* Anzaldúa wrote: "Perhaps, like me you are tired of suffering and talking about suffering Like me you may be tired of making a tragedy of our lives."¹⁶

In 1988, having worked for some time to add women to inherited histories, believing for some time that adding women to the story would fix it, I was jarred by Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life*. Heilbrun wrote that of the two elements of a story, actors and narrative, the crucial element is the narrative. "What matters," she wrote, "is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories are what has formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives."¹⁷

And, I would add, new histories.

A number of conventions, Heilbrun said, limit women's stories — the pressure to put men at the centre of our stories, as well as our lives; the pressure to

15 Donna Kate Rushin, "The Bridge Poem," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, eds. Moraga and Anzaldúa, xxi-xxii.

16 Gloria Anzaldúa, "Forward to the Second Edition," in *This Bridge Called My Back* eds. Moraga and Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

17 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 37.

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

deny both accomplishment and suffering; forbidden emotions, particularly "anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life"; and the limited plots and conventions of romance.¹⁸ Some of these conventions are particular to fiction; some are particular to white heterosexual elites.

What, then, have been the conventions of the histories that we have used to imagine new narratives? Histories, too, are stories — not fictions, but particular tales enacted in particular arenas, with chosen beginnings, ends, actors, and plots. Repeated in schools, in texts, on movie screens, at Canada Day and Fourth of July picnics, histories can become national creation stories: the accepted version of the development of a people, an unconscious inheritance that shapes how we see our own lives and possibilities.¹⁹

Women's lives push the boundaries of national creation stories: the boundaries of public acts and discourse, the conceptual fences erected by the assumptions that nations are the primary subjects of history, not people or human relationships. History viewed through the lenses of gender, class, and race challenges the authoritative voice and objective tone valorized in so many history books and classrooms. "There is no 'objective' or universal tone in literature," Heilbrun observed. "There is only the white, middle-class, male tone."²⁰

And there is the convention of linear narrative that does not easily accommodate multiple voices, contradiction, separate realities, multiple stories. The concept of history that Wallace Stegner wrote in *Wolf Willow*, meditating on the history of the Cypress Hills: "[H]istory is a pontoon bridge. Every man walks and works at its building end, and has come as far as he has over the pontoons laid by others he may never have heard of [T]he actions of men are consecutive and indivisible."²¹

Some of those pontoons may have been laid by unheard aboriginals, métis, women, perhaps aiming for another shore, perhaps anchored by different moorings. Or maybe there are lots of pontoons floating across a choppy lake, colliding in the fog. If the first step of women's history was to lower the drawbridge, the next was to untie the pontoons. The western historian Richard White once quipped: "If the old western history is the story of a line of white men penetrating a virgin land, the new western history is the story of coitus inter-

18 Ibid., 13.

19 For a gendered analysis of the U.S. version of such a "creation story," see Elizabeth Jameson, "Unconscious Inheritance and Conscious Striving: Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Frontier Narrative," in *Laura Ingalls Wilder and the American Frontier*, ed. Dwight M. Miller (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).

20 Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, 40.

21 Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962, 1990), 29.

ruptus.”²² If we want to be heard, women have to interrupt the stories of inevitable linear masculine progress, the histories built on the backs of silenced stories.

It is a hard thing to make up histories to live by. “There are no bridges,” Anzaldúa wrote. “One builds them as one walks.”²³

Men with access to public power can see themselves in written history; women enter it through a number of conflicted stories. We have family lore, validated in private and personal arenas, that transmits the stories of our mothers and grandmothers. We have “woman talk,” confidences shared in private with trusted women friends. And we have public history that has largely validated and valorized the nation, legal and military history, military and political leaders.

To bridge those narratives we first had to hear women’s stories, their structures and silences, leap from the authority of schoolbooks and public records to oral language, the often spiraling, weaving, non-linear forms of storytelling. In the mid-1970s I lugged my tape recorder to Colorado mining towns to record women born in the 1890s. Their first response was always: “Why do you want to talk to me? I didn’t do anything.” They began from a concept of history made somewhere else, outside their homes, on battlefields, in union halls. As they talked and I listened we all began to understand history differently. I sat with 85-year-old Beulah Pryor in her living room, as she taught me to make rag rugs, stuffed me with lemonade and homemade ginger cookies, and talked to me about contraception and orgasms and how her stepfather beat her mother and how the miners next door helped her mother leave her abusive husband, promising to board with her so she could feed her four children.²⁴ I sipped coffee in another living room while May Wing, also 85, told me about contraception before 1910, about a woman who went door to door teaching miners’ wives a recipe for suppositories made of cocoa butter and boric acid.²⁵ Beulah Pryor and May Wing and other women shared these confidences as they had with women friends, in private spaces, over coffee and lemonade, in a form authentic to women’s stories. Was it OK, then, to share such stories in public histories? I wrestled with the ethical dilemma, asked them if they wanted me not to share any of what I’d recorded, played their tapes for public audiences when they were present, and told their stories as they wanted them remembered. When I opened my first Canadian women’s history, *A Harvest Yet to*

22 White used this line in his address to the 1989 “Trails” conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but omitted it from his published paper from that conference. Richard White, “Trashing the Trails,” in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, eds. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles Rankin, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 26-40.

23 Anzaldúa, “Forward to the Second Edition.”

24 Beulah Pryor, interview by author, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 6 May 1979.

25 May Wing, interview by author, Boulder, Colorado, 6 March 1976.

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

Reap, I found an unsigned letter to “Dear Momma” in Violet McNaughton’s personal papers with the same contraceptive recipe May Wing had told me.²⁶ Breaking silence established common ground. Almost three years after we met, May claimed her historical space: “I lived the history that I can tell,” she said. “And, of course, the history today, in books that’s written a lot, is not really the true thing, as it was lived.”²⁷

I believe her. Yet Heilbrun is right: making new histories presents particular narrative and conceptual challenges. If women have had trouble seeing their lives as history, even the most committed feminist historians have had a hard time merging women into mainstream History-with-a-capital-H. The progress to date is both impressive and sobering; it offers guidance for the histories yet to bridge. For despite a generation of feminist historical scholarship, it has been difficult to destabilize the historical frameworks that marginalized women from national historical narratives. The first histories that students encounter are most often the national survey history textbooks that shape the first knowledge of what history is and what history matters. And despite admirable efforts and intentions it has proved difficult to move women to the centres of the Canadian and American history surveys.

I base my observations on six history textbooks, three of them co-authored by respected feminists: two Canadian history texts, *Journeys: A History of Canada* by Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald Smith, and *Canada: A National History* by Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel; the post-Civil War sections of two American history texts, *Out of Many* by John Mack Faragher, Mary Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan Armitage, and *Created Equal* by Jacqueline Jones, Peter Wood, Thomas Borstelmann, Elaine Tyler May, and Vicki Ruiz; and two western American history texts, *The American West* by Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher, and *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* by Richard White.²⁸ I should acknowledge that I know many of the authors of these books.

26 Linda Rasmussen, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage, and Anne Wheeler, *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976), 72.

27 May Wing, interview by author, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 16 February 1979.

28 R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald B. Smith, *Journeys: A History of Canada* (Toronto: Thompson Nelson, 2006); Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *Canada: A National History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2007); John Mack Faragher, Mary Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, Combined Volume, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006); Jacqueline Jones, Peter H. Wood, Thomas Borstelmann, Elaine Tyler May, and Vicki L. Ruiz, *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States*, Brief Edition (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005); Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

Women's histories began by adding women, so let's begin there. All six texts include women, but they remain vastly outnumbered, especially in the western histories, whose populations resemble the skewed sex ratios of cattle drives or gold camps. Of 368 names in Richard White's index, thirty are women; Faragher and Hine list thirty-five women, 478 men. The other U.S. texts did better: *Created Equal* has 73 women, *Out of Many*, eighty-one of 630 names, or 13 percent. The Canadian text *Journeys* names the most women: 135, or 17 percent of the total; Conrad and Finkel list fifty-three, or 11 percent.²⁹

Of all these women, almost a fourth are writers or artists; another 20 percent are academics or professionals, including historians. Twelve percent are activists or reformers, 11 percent leaders of organizations; one in ten is a political leader, often a historic "first" such as Agnes Macphail, the first woman to serve in Parliament; or Kim Campbell, the first (and so far only) woman Prime Minister; or Jeanette Rankin, the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress. These categories are not precise — was Nellie McClung a reformer or a writer? Was Mary Ann Shadd Cary a teacher, writer, professional, or anti-slavery activist? The common link is that they wrote and left records.

Women's inclusion was, however, broader than these named individuals. Women got some separate space in most texts, and paragraphs about women are scattered throughout. In the four national histories, some of the separate sections about women followed the "women and" formula, adding women to standard topics or historical periods: Women in Upper Canada, Women and the War Effort, Women in the 1920s, Native Women and the Fur Trade.³⁰ Such topics account for about 15 percent of the separate space devoted to women. The topical arrangement of textbooks allowed for the insertion of some "women's topics." Most of the pages that focus on women's subjects, about a third, go to women's movements, suffrage, and reform. Gender roles in society gets almost 20 percent; family, 7 percent; women and work, 8 percent.

Women enter the collective narrative in topics such as homesteading, labour, the Social Gospel, Prohibition, the auto age, First Nations, slavery,

29 These figures were further supported by figures from the multi-volume versions of several of these texts, which were counted after I gave the keynote on which this essay is based. The first half of Douglas, Francis, and Smith, for instance, included 47 women, or nine percent of the total; the second half, 103, or 15 percent. R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald B. Smith, *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation*, 5th ed. (Toronto: Thompson Nelson, 2004) and *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation*, 5th ed. (Toronto: Thompson Nelson, 2004). Conrad and Finkel, Vol. 1, included 12 percent women in the index; Vol. 2, 21 percent. Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples*, Vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006). Counting names is an admittedly blunt instrument for assessing gender content. My point here is that the categories of national textbook histories do not easily include most women, and that women's proportionately small representation reinforces the impression that men are more significant historical actors.

30 See for example, Francis, Jones, and Smith, *Journeys*, 125-6, 134, 191-2, 253-4.

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

wartime economy, the welfare state, the environment, recording artists, and so on.³¹ Both the extent and the terms of women's representations are hard to quantify. Adding the pages in the indexes that are clearly related to women's history, women's representation may, at a rough estimate, range from a low of 6 percent (thirty-six of 561 pages in *The American West*) to the high teens in White's western history text. The rest fall in between, ranging from perhaps a bit under ten percent to a bit over 15 percent. These figures are not precise; they are skewed by differences in indexing systems, my own astigmatism, page duplications, and counting as whole pages any page on which women appeared. If anything, they inflate the figures for women's inclusion.

The categories of inclusion and exclusion, however, are far more interesting than the numbers. Women remain largely absent from some of the political and economic topics of state-centred histories. In *Created Equal*, women are still missing from post-Civil War Reconstruction, urban development and big business, American imperialism, World War II and the Road to War, Eisenhower and the Age of Consensus. In *Canada: A National History*, organized by overlapping topical chapters for the same time periods, women are present somewhere in all times, but virtually disappear from chapters such as Empires in Conflict and Redefining British North America, though the authors introduce the latter chapter with a letter from Loyalist Sally Winslow.³²

There has been enormous progress from my elementary school texts to those we teach today. We should thank every women's historian we know for that achievement, which rests on forty years of feminist scholarship. Still, the terms of inclusion in these textbooks do not incorporate all the available scholarship. They focus predominantly on the first steps that Gerda Lerner outlined in 1975: adding women of extraordinary achievement, telling women's contributions to male institutions, and documenting oppression and the struggle for women's rights. These steps, she suggested, would lead to a transitional history, the search for new sources, new conceptual frameworks, an expanded cast, and ultimately to a new paradigm of history.³³ We're not there yet. We're in the transitional stage. These texts record the distances travelled and those yet to go.

The roadblocks — or drawbridges — are substantial. Textbooks are big business, and publishers are loath to risk sales. In the United States, publishers cannot alienate the California and Texas textbook adoption committees that control a huge slice of the K-12 market. *Out of Many* drew fire in Texas for two paragraphs on sex workers that stated, "perhaps 50,000 women engaged in prostitution west of the Mississippi during the second half of the nineteenth

31 See for example, *Ibid.*, 60-1, 308, 346, 421; Faragher, Buhle, Czitrom, and Armitage, *Out of Many*, 491, 524, 543, 568-9, 835; Conrad and Finkel, *Canada*, 26, 66, 139, 377, 461-2.

32 Conrad and Finkel, *Canada*, 81-96, 115-33. These remarks pertain to text only; there are visual images of women in these chapters, another strategy of inclusion the authors employed.

33 Lerner, "Placing Women in History."

century.”³⁴ States and provinces fund history programs. This fuels attacks from politicians and from historians such as J. L. Granatstein and Gertrude Himmelfarb, who believe that social histories threaten national histories, and that women and people of colour are included only to be “politically correct.”³⁵

The bigger challenges are conceptual. We grapple with those challenges not to be politically correct but to be historically accurate. One of those concepts is the assumption that history *is* and ought to be the story of the nation. History as a discipline developed with the creation of nation states, assumed to be the proper subjects of histories.³⁶ In state-centred histories, people were important as citizens — as subjects of states, not of histories. Women’s histories won’t erase national histories, because national identities, citizenship, state regulations, and state services all mattered to women, and continue to matter. The issue is not the nation, but the assumption that it is the *only* subject, and the concept of nation that emphasizes male activity in governmental institutions. Addressing women’s political roles goes beyond locating women involved in government; it means reconceptualizing what constitutes politics to include grass-roots movements and initiatives. And as Joan Sangster recently observed, feminist histories “have challenged the idea of a homogeneous (masculine) nation,” while the concept of a single nation is “problematic for regional, minority, linguistic and colonized groups, some of whom embrace their [own] national(ist) histories.”³⁷

A second concept that limits women’s historical representation is that of minority status, the uninterrogated belief that inherited histories represent the majority, the norm, and that textbook authors must evenhandedly allot some space to each marginalized minority: native peoples, Blacks, Latinos in the

34 Faragher, Buhle, Czitrom, and Armitage, *Out of Many*, 481. For the controversy, see “Religious Right Groups Join Forces to Select Texas Textbooks,” *Church and State* (October 2002); “Textbook Publishers Learn to Avoid Messing with Texas,” *New York Times* (29 June 2002); Dr. Ricky Dobbs, Assistant Professor of History, Texas A&M University at Commerce, “High School American History (After Reconstruction) Textbook Review,” Texas Public Policy Foundation, State Board of Education Textbook Hearing, 23 August 2002.

35 J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987); Gertrude Himmelfarb, “The Election and the Culture Wars,” *Commentary* 109, no. 5 (May 2000): 23-6.

36 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983); Ian Tyrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 1031-55.

37 Joan Sangster, “Archiving feminist histories: Women, the ‘nation’ and metanarratives in Canadian historical writing,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29 (2006): 255-64. Sangster suggests that historians must deal with the “inescapable nation” and re-embrace it “with critical eyes,” 257, 259.

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

United States, Francophones in Canada, women. That assumption *is* based in false concepts of political correctness. Women are not a minority, but occupy particular gendered space in all groups.³⁸ The larger issue is who makes history, and how, and where.

The critical power of conceptual frameworks helps explain why the two western history texts defined opposite ends of the range in the space they devoted to women. The less inclusive *American West* is more recent, published nine years after White's book appeared in 1991. Both appeared *after* a 1986 article, "Rethinking the Western History Survey Course," in which four Yale historians argued that the structures and categories of western history excluded women.³⁹ Chief of these exclusionary categories was the frontier itself, defined by masculine economies, politics, conflicts and myths, and racist in its exclusion of native peoples. Survey courses were organized around resource frontiers defined by male economic activities: mining, lumbering, ranching, and farming — in Canada we could add fishing and the fur trade. There was no gardeners' frontier, no butter or poultry frontier, no cooking and sewing and childrearing frontier. The second category of exclusion was the tendency of frontier surveys to follow one frontier after another, forging a narrative that erased the post-frontier periods when women became more numerous and more visible as community builders who established schools, libraries, hospitals, and religious institutions.⁴⁰

The limiting factor in *The American West* was the book's frontier framework, while White managed to write 631 pages without mentioning that "f" word. *The American West's* frontier framework could include women only by slotting them into supporting roles that didn't change the story. To the story of the Spanish conquest, for example, it added Malintzín Tenépal, Cortés' interpreter who bore his son, just as one could add Charlotte Small or Sacagawea as helpful guides for David Thompson or Lewis and Clark, and still not focus on native histories or on native women as subjects.⁴¹

These are transitional texts. The invitation to speak at the Canadian Women's Studies Association annual meeting took me back to Heilbrun, this time to *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold*, based on lectures she gave at the University of Toronto in 1997, which examined how the feminist

38 See Lerner, "The Challenge of Women's History," 170-1.

39 William Cronon, Howard R. Lamar, Katherine G. Morrissey, and Jay Gitlin, "Women and the West: Rethinking the Western History Survey Course," *Western Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (July 1986): 269-90.

40 *Ibid.*, especially 271-3, 277.

41 Hine and Faragher, 19. The authors focus principally on the contested symbolism of the derogatory name "La Malinche," which connoted a traitor who sold out her people by sleeping with the enemy. The larger point is that all three women had complex histories of their own, but they are usually included in the national narratives as helpmates in the project of European exploration and conquest.

movement, begun in the 1960s, has changed how women write their lives. The changes, Heilbrun said, have brought women to a liminal place, a threshold experience. "To be in a state of liminality," she wrote, is to be "poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one country or condition or self and entering upon another."⁴² Anzaldúa, too, chose the metaphor of the threshold in 2002 in *This Bridge We Call Home*, an anthology she edited with Analouise Keating that revisits the metaphors and practices of bridging. "To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant us safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk."⁴³

Bridging to the centres of historical narratives is risky because it challenges the power that public knowledge has inscribed. On that shaky, liminal ground, the strategies of inclusion in each text become thresholds from which to take the next steps to new paradigms of history.

One strategy in several texts was to insert biographical portraits of famous women such as Margaret Atwood, or features about women's institutions such as religious orders and the WCTU.⁴⁴ These strategies speak to one advantage of textbooks: they are not linear narratives. Inserts, special features, charts, pictures, and marginal quotes can place contradictions and multiple voices together on a page, can suggest some of the complexity of diverse and overlapping histories. These are strategies that could be extended to include a greater variety of women. *Journeys* did this in an insert titled "A Historical Portrait: Betty, Ruby, and the Others," about the variety of post-war divisions of labour and housework, based on Joy Parr's *Domestic Goods*, Veronica Strong-Boag's article "Home Dreams," and Edna Staebler's *Haven't Any News: Ruby's Letters from the Fifties*.⁴⁵

Another strategy was to include women's history through featured historiographic debates about topics such as the Status of Women in New France,

42 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3. The essays in this volume were delivered as the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto in 1997.

43 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

44 See for instance "Female Religious Orders," and "Elsie Gregory MacGill," in Conrad and Finkel, *Canada*, 30-1, 379; "Women Reformers: 'Beginning to Burst the Bonds'," in *Created Equal*, Jones, et al., 419-20; "Community Portrait: The Community of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Journeys*, Francis, Jones, and Smith, 256.

45 "A Historical Portrait: Betty, Ruby, and the Others," in *Journeys*, Francis, Jones, and Smith, 445-6, based on Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), chapter 10; Edna Staebler, ed. *Haven't Any News: Ruby's Letters from the Fifties* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1995), 58; and Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1845-60," *Canadian Historical Review* 72 (1991): 504.

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

Women and Reform, Women and Unions in Postwar Canada.⁴⁶ That is a useful strategy that might be extended to engage the debate about what historians think history is, about different theories of who makes history, and how, and where. As a transitional strategy, it might invite students into the discussion, and clarify why textbooks jump from national politics and diplomacy back to sex roles and race relations.

Some texts begin to stretch the narrative by fitting women into standard topics in nonstandard ways. Instead of using a white male steelworker or autoworker to discuss the economic impacts of globalization, *Created Equal* introduced Mollie Brown James, an African American woman who moved from her native Virginia north to New Jersey in 1950. She worked thirty-four years for the Universal Manufacturing Company, earning wages that allowed her to buy a home and save for retirement, until the plant closed in 1989 and moved to Matamores, Mexico. There another young woman from a rural area, Balbina duque Granados, was hired to do the same job.⁴⁷ Telling the story this way humanizes the workers on both sides of the border. It connects home, work, and capital flight across international boundaries.

This framework could be stretched further by using as central organizing concepts throughout the text the gendered divisions of labour, the social and economic functions of households, and the connections among paid and unpaid labour, service work and commodity production. In such a framework, the story of industrialization would begin with the removal of production from the household. The story of globalization and deindustrialization would connect the loss of men's manufacturing jobs with the growth of women's jobs in the service sector, as service work changed from unpaid home labour to wage work.

The building blocks exist in the textbooks. Together, the topics of gender roles in society, family, and women and work totaled over a third of women's coverage. *Created Equal's* treatment of nineteenth-century labour militancy includes women box makers, fish packers, and three thousand Atlanta washer-women who went on strike in 1881.⁴⁸ *It's Your Misfortune* includes gender divisions of labour in colonial New Mexico, on the overland trail, in mining towns, Protestant churches, and during World War II.⁴⁹ Four sections in Conrad and Finkel, "Gender and Society," "Public and Private Worlds," "Family and Work," and "Women, Work, and the Family" follow gendered divisions of

46 Francis, Jones, and Smith, "Where Historians Disagree: Women and Reform," "Where Historians Disagree: Women and Unions in Postwar Canada," *Journeys*, 351-2, 455-6; Conrad and Finkel, "A Historiographical Debate: The Status of Women in New France," *Canada*, 79-80.

47 Jones, et al, *Created Equal*, 677.

48 Ibid., 413.

49 White, *It's Your Misfortune*, 16-17, 203-04, 277-8, 311-13, 518-19.

labour from the colonial period to the twentieth century, and link them to life cycle, sexuality and reproduction, and community building.⁵⁰ More fully developed descriptions of women's domestic work and its transformations could link these sections to those on workforce formation, and move the gender of breadwinners to the centre of the narrative.

The major strategy of inclusion is really to ask, for every chapter of history, every subject, what the women were doing while the men were doing whatever they were doing. Let me illustrate briefly how this question might affect an event, the Gold Rush, and a topic, public politics, both of which usually include few women. Nineteenth-century gold rushes were overwhelmingly masculine, whether to the goldfields of California, the Cariboo, the Yukon, or elsewhere. They become gendered stories if we leave the diggings to explore who fed the miners; to examine the racial and gender characteristics of a market in domestic services that included boarding houses, sex workers, and Chinese laundries; and if we follow the men back home, tracing the ties that bound them to women who maintained families, farms and businesses in eastern North America, Cornwall, and China.⁵¹

For public politics, the story needs to stretch from suffrage and women office holders to the grassroots where women mobilized. The history of battered women's shelters began when women broke silence about abuse. One way to write political history is to begin with those private stories, and to link Beulah Pryor's mother and her individual strategy of surviving by keeping boarders to the later story of institution building.⁵² Or consider the mothers of East Los Angeles, Latina environmental activists, who organized in 1986 to fight the location of a prison and a hazardous waste incinerator in their neighbourhood. They forged political resources from skills learned in gender-related church work and the PTA, then mobilized their networks and organizing experience to work for water conservation, distribute free low-flush toilets, and stop the construction of an aboveground oil pipeline through their neighborhood.⁵³

50 Conrad and Finkel, "Gender and Society," "Public and Private Worlds," "Family and Work," and "Women, Work, and the Family," *Canada*, 157-9, 201-02, 271-3, 344-5.

51 For an example and some of the literature on which such a narrative might be based, see Elizabeth Jameson, "Where Have All the Young Men Gone?: The Social Legacy of the California Gold Rush," in *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World*, ed. Kenneth N. Owens (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 202-29.

52 See for instance Janovicek, *No Place to Go*.

53 Mary Pardo, "Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: 'Mothers of East Los Angeles'," in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*, eds., Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 553-68. Pardo's article first appeared in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 11, no. 1 (1990): 1-7; citations are from the reprint version. See also Hugh Dellios, "Group Preaches Gospel of Water Conservation," *Chicago Tribune* (20 March 1995); Marilyn Martinez, "Legacy of a Mother's Dedication," *Los Angeles Times* (1 September 1995); "Mother's Group Fights Back

THIS BRIDGE CALLED WOMEN'S STORIES:
PRIVATE LORE AND PUBLIC HISTORY

Leader Erlinda Robles described their first political acts of self-assertion: "In the beginning, the priests used to say who the president of the mothers guild would be; they used to pick 'em. But, we wanted elections, so we got elections."⁵⁴ Women claimed time from families for political work, and drew men in to make signs and provide security. Ultimately they redefined motherhood itself. At one meeting a young Latina voiced her support but said apologetically that she was a "resident" of East Los Angeles, not a "mother." Erlinda Robles replied: "When you are fighting for a better life for children and 'doing' for them, isn't that what mothers do? So we're all mothers. You don't have to have children to be a 'mother'."⁵⁵ If we can conceive of environmental activism from the perspectives of urban Latina working-class mothers, we can transform the historical categories and conventions that separate private lore from public history.

I have hinted at a lot of stories in this essay, dropped a lot of names. I wanted to suggest the wealth of tools and sources available to connect complex collective histories. Let me end with a final strategy of inclusion from *Created Equal*, in which the chapter on the Great Depression includes the voices of Latina cannery workers and unemployed Black men. It quotes Ermina Pablita Ruiz Mercer who remembered when her father was injured working in the beet fields in 1933: "He didn't want to live if he couldn't support his family," she said, so he risked experimental back surgery and died on the operating table. Ermina dropped out of school to work as "a doughnut girl" to support her mother and sisters.⁵⁶

Ermina Mercer's story links a large event, the Depression, to personal lives. And it bridges private lore and public history. Historian Vicki Ruiz, matter-of-factly and without comment, simply wrote her mother's story into a history text.

The murmurings of our mothers may *not* always tell us, in Heilbrun's words, "what conventions demand." They can challenge the conventions of history. The bridge between private experience and public activism, between "woman talk" and History-with-a-capital-H, may provide a metaphor and a vantage point from which to link the personal and the political, women's lore and public history.

It takes imagination and courage to claim our own lives as history, to risk linking family stories and "woman talk" as public knowledge. The bridges we've

in Los Angeles," *New York Times* (5 December 1989); Michael Quintanilla, "The Earth Mother," *Los Angeles Times* (24 April 1995); Louis Sahagun, "The Mothers of East L.A. Transform Themselves and Their Community," *Los Angeles Times* (13 August 1989); Nina Schuyler, "LA Moms Fight Back," *Progressive* 56, no. 8 (August 1992): 13.

54 Pardo, "Mexican American Women," 557.

55 Ibid., 559-60.

56 Jones, et al., *Created Equal*, 511.

crossed bring us back to older challenges from a new vantage. Feminist history has destabilized the narratives by trying to move women from the margins to the centres of human experience or by exposing their absence. Now we don't know exactly where we all fit, but change comes from such liminal uncertainty.

I don't know exactly what kind of bridge I want — not a causeway or a pontoon or a covered trestle bridge that blocks the wider view. Maybe something more like a webbing, like Spider Woman's Web.⁵⁷

Standing at this liminal threshold, somewhere between memory and hope, I try to imagine a history that is a compass, not a destination. I want a history that illuminates relationships of power, not simply the acts of the powerful. I want a history that is made not just by armies on the San Jacinto battlefield, but also by the Mothers of East Los Angeles, the sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, women grain growers and washerwomen. I want such a history *because it is true* and because I don't want my grandchildren to think that change can only be made by soldiers.

I want stories that can be two-way bridges, that can link the past of this place before Europeans arrived to a future that includes everyone who calls this place home — that could locate fur traders' aboriginal wives, Charlotte Small, Sacagawea, and Malintzín Tenépal in their own histories, and their histories in collective memory. I want a history that includes the daily acts that make and transform human relationships, that shows that social power begins with who takes out the garbage or changes a diaper or picks the President of the mothers' guild. It would link the personal to the global, to the other sides of national borders and social boundaries; connect Violet McNaughton and that anonymous woman who went door to door teaching contraception; link Molly Brown James, Balbina duque Granados; Angelina Grimké, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and Elnora Palmer. I want to imagine history that makes it unthinkable for someone to say: "Women's history is just the history of dishwashing," or "I didn't do anything." Because until people can see themselves in history, they don't know that they can make history.

If I could write such histories, *I'd* write a textbook. I am grateful to those colleagues who have, whose strategies of inclusion have brought us to this threshold. It's a hard thing to imagine stories to live by. Each of us will have our own compass, our own blueprints — we can discuss them and make adjustments as we go. There are no bridges. We build them as we walk. We make them as we act. We dream them as we write.

* * *

57 I am evoking the image of the Pueblo wise woman, Spider Woman, whose power includes the power to restore harmony to humankind. Pueblo wise women also include the Spirit of Reason and the Spirit of Memory. See Susan Hazen-Hammond, *Spider Woman's Web: Traditional Native American Tales about Women's Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999), 7, 9.

ELIZABETH JAMESON holds the Imperial Oil - Lincoln McKay Chair in American Studies at the University of Calgary. She has taught women's history and women studies since the early 1970s, was a co-founder of University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies and *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. She has chaired the women studies programs at Loretto Heights College, the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, and the University of New Mexico. Her publications include two co-edited volumes, *The Women's West* and *Writing the Range: Race, Class and Culture in the Women's West* (both with Susan Armitage). She co-edited, with Sheila McManus, *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests*, forthcoming in spring 2008 from the University of Alberta Press and Athabasca University Press.

ELIZABETH JAMESON est titulaire de la chaire Imperial Oil - Lincoln McKay en études américaines à l'université de Calgary. Elle a enseigné l'histoire et l'étude des femmes depuis le début des années 1970 et a été cofondatrice de University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies et de *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. Elle a dirigé les programmes d'étude des femmes au Loretto Heights College de l'université du Wisconsin-LaCrosse, et de l'université du Nouveau-Mexique. Parmi ses publications se trouvent deux volumes coédités avec Susan Armitage, soit *The Women's West* et *Writing the Range: Race, Class and Culture in the Women's West*. Elle a aussi coédité avec Sheila McManus, *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests*, qui devrait paraître au printemps 2008 sous les presses de l'université de l'Alberta et de l'université d'Athabasca.