

Writing the Feminist Past

Susan A. Glenn

In a provocative 1992 essay published in *Women's History Review*, the historian Antoinette Burton, a scholar whose work focuses on modern Britain and its empire, analyzed what she called the “production of historical feminisms.” What we call “history,” wrote Burton, is “not simply what happened in the past but, more pointedly, the kinds of *knowledge* about the past that we are *made aware of*.” How, asked Burton, do we “end up” with “the stories about historical feminism upon which we rely?” Her answer was that what we “know” about the feminist past is itself a product of “discrete historical moments” in which certain kinds of histories fulfilled the “needs” of feminist movements and feminist critics. As Burton put it, the production of knowledge is a reflection of the “now” as much as the “then.”¹ Burton’s essay was a critique of how “Western feminist experiences” had become an “exclusive point of reference for ‘feminism.’” The result, she pointed out, was not just the failure to “come to terms with the ethnocentric/imperial/racist ideologies which structured the white middle-class feminism of Europe and America” but the failure to “see” and thus to “know” both non-Western and nonwhite forms of “women’s resistance.”²

In 1992, when Burton published this essay, Jews in the United States had long since taken up residence on the “white” side of the color line and the question of how, why, and even whether Jewish “difference” mattered in what Burton called the construction of the “feminist past” did not figure in her discussion. Yet the theme of visibility and invisibility that concerned Burton not only animated the broader field of women’s history, it also stirred debates about the writing of Jewish women’s history. Listen, for example, to the words of historian Melissa Klapper, who observed in 2005 that “American women’s

Susan A. Glenn, “Writing the Feminist Past,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 24, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 17–32. Copyright © 2019 The Trustees of Indiana University. doi: 10.2979/jewisocstud.24.2.03

history has marginalized Jewish women; American Jewish history has marginalized women; [and] Jewish women's history has marginalized nineteenth century middle-class Jewish women." To the extent that the history of Jewish adolescents—the topic of Klapper's first book—had been considered at all, she noted, it was only as "sweatshop girls."³ Klapper may have overstated the point about the marginalization of middle-class Jewish women's history, a history that had been well documented by Paula Hyman and other historians, but she was definitely onto something important.⁴ Her comments anticipated what only a few years later would become a full-blown debate about why Jewish women remained largely invisible within the historiography of American feminism when so many of the pioneers in the field of women's history had come from Jewish backgrounds.

When and on what terms were Jewish women "seen"? In what follows, I examine three "now" periods in which feminist historians, animated by differing concerns and paradigms, engaged with the topic of Jews and Jewishness in different ways. I begin by offering some general observations about the "then/now" phenomenon in the production of feminist knowledge about Jewish women in the United States, suggesting how the need to see *radicalism* in Jewish women's history accounts for many of the stories that we "ended up" with. Ironically, though the tendency to equate *radical* with *Jewish* brought greater attention to gender difference in fields like American labor and working-class history, the collapsing of categories had the effect of both erasing and accentuating Jewish difference in the historiography on women and feminism.

Seeing Working-Class Radicalism

The first "now" period in the production of feminist knowledge about Jews—roughly the mid-1970s to the early 1990s—was part of an explosion of interest in women's class and labor radicalism. "Sweatshop girls" (and women) became iconic figures of early twentieth-century Jewish women's history in the United States in part because they fulfilled the need of a rising generation of left-leaning feminist scholars to emphasize both that *Women Have Always Worked* (the title of Alice Kessler-Harris's 1981 book) and that they had actively inserted themselves into the struggle to improve the lives of working-class people.⁵ In her groundbreaking article "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union" (1976), the first study to look specifically at the role of Jewish women as labor activists, Kessler-Harris

focused on International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) organizers Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn, and Rose Pesotta, asking what feminism had "meant for immigrant women." She concluded that for these Jewish women, "neither the [male-dominated] trade union" nor solidarity from the middle-class allies who headed the Women's Trade Union League "offered adequate support to the exceptional women who devoted themselves to organizing." "How," Kessler-Harris asked, "did they choose between the two? And at what cost?"⁶ All three of these radical Jewish women found themselves in a precarious situation. "They were not feminist," Kessler-Harris argued, because "they did not put the social and political rights of women before all else." Though they did draw "strength and support" from the solidarity of women in and outside of unions, and though "their lives illustrate the critical importance of 'female bonding'" and female friendship networks, in the end, writes Kessler-Harris, "class consciousness" mattered more to these women than feminist solidarity. "When their class consciousness and their identification as women conflicted, they bowed to tradition and threw in their lot with the working class."⁷

My own work built upon but also pushed beyond those observations. *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (1990) is a transatlantic history of Eastern European Jewish women who, as teenagers and young adults, helped support their families by toiling in garment factories and sweatshops and played a pivotal role in the organization of the two major garment workers' unions, the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. It analyzes both the Old and New World experiences of immigrant women and argues that labor activism provided young unmarried Jewish daughters with a sense of personal dignity and self-importance available nowhere else in Jewish society.

When the editors of this journal invited me to reflect upon how feminist scholarship has informed the field of Jewish Studies and my work in particular, I began to revisit the question of how I came to write a "feminist" history about the rank-and-file Jewish women who, I argued, did not view themselves as feminists. *Daughters of the Shtetl* was a product of my own intellectual "now" as an activist-scholar coming of age in the late 1970s. It was also a product of my personal history as the granddaughter of Russian Jewish immigrants and especially of my relationship with my maternal grandmother, a tailor's daughter, and an ambitious grammar-school-educated autodidact who, in the early 1920s, escaped the poverty of the immigrant milieu by going to night school and becoming a successful legal secretary. She never tired of talking to me about how much she cried the day she had to quit her

[19]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*

•
Susan
A. Glenn

job when she got married and how valued and appreciated the work had made her feel. Ironically, her ideas about women (and the world in general) were more “modern” than those of her American-born daughter (my mother), who had come of age during World War II. I had been vaguely aware of this irony before I wrote the book, but the process of research and writing deepened my intellectual engagement with this fact. It led me to ask myself why it should be that my grandmother, the product of a working-class immigrant milieu, loved to tell me that my glasses made me look “just like” Gloria Steinem, a feminist icon whom my mother seemed to have little use for. Writing *Daughters of the Shtetl* helped me realize that my grandmother belonged to the unsettled generation of Jewish New Women, who, I argued, moved not in a straight line toward one identifiable model of feminine identity but back and forth like a pendulum between the desire to participate in the world outside the home and the equally compelling world of domestic respectability. My mother’s generation of American-born daughters, by contrast, had their feet more firmly planted in the white, middle-class world that journalist Betty Friedan derided as the mythic world of the “happy housewife heroine.”

Daughters of the Shtetl was also a product of influences within what might be called my “academic” family. Although the historians I worked with at various stages of my graduate career at Berkeley—among them Leon F. Litwack, Paula S. Fass, and Natalie Zemon Davis—all came from different Jewish milieus, they did not write “Jewish” history.⁸ Yet their scholarship on the lives and voices of ordinary people—African Americans in slavery and freedom, peasants and artisans in sixteenth-century France, seventeenth-century Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant women “living on the margins” of their respective societies, and the influential roles played by youth groups—had a formative impact on my own choice of topic and on my methodology. I learned from their work the importance of paying close attention to how subordinated groups used the tools at their disposal to challenge the structures of power; how cultural and religious values mattered in social unrest; how the family as an institution and the community in which it was situated could variously encourage or discourage female activism; how sex roles and gender symbolism varied across time, space, and generation; and the many forms that resilience, resourcefulness, and rebelliousness can take.

In *Daughters of the Shtetl*, I found that young Jewish women did not “fit neatly into the established models of immigration, labor, and women’s history.” To focus only on “gender roles and relations” in women’s history, I argued, was to ignore “the ways in which immigration and

ethnic group culture informed the lives of women at work, at play, and in protest and political activity.” Although Jewish daughters faced considerable discrimination in the union movement, they nevertheless viewed themselves as “partners” with men in the struggle to better the conditions of working-class life, an outlook that differentiated them from the middle-class, “woman-centered” politics of feminist reformers and suffragists who embraced the notion of female moral superiority and saw female separatism as a viable strategy for organizing.⁹

But without a clearly articulated commitment to “feminism,” Jewish women’s class-conscious activism did not totally fulfill the needs of the feminist “now.” Annelise Orleck’s *Common Sense and a Little Fire* (1995), which came hard on the heels of *Daughters of the Shtetl*, attempted to write feminism into working-class Jewish women’s history by emphasizing the commitment of four Jewish activists to two key tenets of feminism: “sisterhood is powerful” and “the personal is political.” Orleck, whose grandmother had worked in the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist factory, aimed to provide what she called “an important corrective to . . . the popular misconception that feminism was reserved to the middle and upper classes.”¹⁰ Focusing on the period from 1920 to 1960, she explored the activist lives of four Jewish immigrant women—Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn, Pauline Newman, and Clara Lemlich (Shavelson)—who exemplified what Orleck labeled “industrial feminism.” Echoing but also revising the meaning of my claim that Jewish immigrant women “do not fit neatly into established models of . . . women’s history,” Orleck declared that industrial feminism “does not fit neatly into the established categories of American feminist history.” She showed that in the 1920s and 1930s, Cohn, Newman, and Schneiderman eschewed traditional marriage, forged a family life out of close female relationships, and devoted themselves to programs for the protection and uplift of women workers. Clara Lemlich—best remembered as the “girl leader” of the Uprising of the 20,000 in 1909—was the only one of the four to marry and the only one to join the Communist Party. During the 1930s, she and other women in the Communist Party organized cooperative childcare and community kitchens, led rent strikes, and raised money for striking workers.¹¹

The need to see radicalism in Jewish women’s history also helps to explain the particular fascination with the image and idea of Emma Goldman. What historian Oz Frankel has called the “cult” of Emma Goldman began in the late 1960s, when radical activists “recruited” Goldman and her anarchist ideology to analyze both the past and the present of women’s oppression.¹² “The Traffic in Women” (1910),

[21]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*

•
Susan
A. Glenn

perhaps the most widely read of Goldman's essays, helped feminists like Alix Kates Shulman (b. 1932)—a founder of the radical feminist collective Redstockings and the editor of *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader* (1972)—find the tools to theorize “how women internalized their oppression in the form of unconscious ‘internal tyrants’ that prevented them from taking their destiny into their own hands.”¹³ More than anyone else, it was Shulman who helped invent what Frankel refers to as the trope of “bad girl Emma.” The preface to Shulman's 1971 popular biography, *To the Barricades: The Anarchist Life of Emma Goldman*, a book intended for budding feminist readers, aims to transform Goldman from a figure to be feared into a model to be emulated.¹⁴ “In her day,” writes Shulman, “she was known as ‘the most dangerous woman in the world.’ Small children were told, ‘if you're not good, Emma Goldman will get you.’ All she had to do was show up in a city or town and she was likely to be arrested.”¹⁵

Could Goldman be classified as a “Jewish” radical? The fiery anarchist saw the Jewish Question as an aspect of the larger “social question.” Goldman lectured both in Yiddish and in English and was sympathetic to the struggle of Jews to survive in a hostile world, but she remained an atheist until the day she died, rejecting not only Judaism and Christianity but all forms of nationalism, including Zionism. Ironically, when Goldman became the subject of scholarly inquiry in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was male scholars who emphasized the connections between her Jewishness and her radicalism.¹⁶ By contrast, the feminist historians (themselves Jewish) who became her biographers in the 1980s focused not on the supposedly Jewish aspects of Goldman's life but on the complex and contradictory relationship between her anarchist feminism and the difficulties and disappointments of her tempestuous “intimate” life. This was the focus of Candace Falk's *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (1984) and Alice Wexler's *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life* (1984) and *Emma Goldman in Exile: From the Russian Revolution to the Spanish Civil War* (1989).¹⁷ Falk explained what she perceived as the needs of the feminist “now” when she defended her choice to focus on the tumultuous sexual relationship that Goldman had with her unfaithful lover, Ben Reitman. In Falk's words, it was important to remember Emma not only as a champion of birth control and “free love” but also as a woman who had her own “disappointments” and who “dared to go to the heart of [other] people's disappointments in life and then politicize those issues to make people feel the connection between their personal experiences and the experience of the whole society and culture.”¹⁸

Seeing “Excess”

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the cultural, linguistic, and corporeal “turns”; the theoretical formations influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque; the symbolic anthropology of Victor Turner; Michel Foucault’s insights into the technologies of power; Judith Butler’s writings on the performativity of gender; and Joan Wallach Scott’s foundational essay on gender as a category of historical analysis inspired an outpouring of scholarship on the politics of representation. Across the disciplines, scholars, especially those influenced by the work of Butler, explored the meaning making of layered and intersecting representations of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sex differences, and the many ways in which such representations were circulated, reinforced, “troubled,” queered, transgressed, or subverted. Interest in the cultural construction and deconstruction of femaleness, maleness, blackness, and Jewishness led to the production of new work on cross-dressing, drag, masquerade, parody, burlesque, and sexual inversion. These frameworks provided new lenses for examining Jews, women, gender, and feminism.¹⁹

Riv-Ellen Prell’s *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (1999) maps a cultural history of how gender stereotypes of Jewish women and men inverted, distorted, and refracted aspects of “the real” world of assimilating immigrants and their children and how images of female “excess” were transformed in response to changes in cultural and material life.²⁰ Prell, an anthropologist who spent her adolescent years in the 1960s trying to differentiate herself from stereotypes of Jewish female excess, challenged the concept of “timeless” ethnic cultures. She argued that the catalogue of negative stereotypes—from the “vulgarity” of Lower East Side “ghetto girls” to the “pushiness” of Jewish mothers, to the shallow and materialistic desires of twentieth-century Jewish “princesses”—functioned in different ways as the medium through which Jewish women and men “expressed and reflected upon their [changing] relationship to America.” In the final chapter, on “talking back through counter-representations,” Prell analyzed the tactics of late twentieth-century female “talk-back” artists, writers, and comedians who parodied and deconstructed gendered stereotypes. Was talk-back art feminist? Although Jewish women’s talk-back art emerged in an era of feminist self-assertion, Prell emphasized that it lacked an explicit political agenda. Rather than dismantling concepts of Jewish women’s excess, talk-back art, which “simultaneously flaunted, explored, and rejected” stereotypes, effectively

[23]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*

•
Susan
A. Glenn

kept them alive, albeit in an altered form as a resource for ethnic self-differentiation.²¹

[24]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*



Vol. 24
No. 2

My own academic interest in the historical meanings of female “excess” began with my reading of Natalie Zemon Davis’s 1975 essay “Women on Top,” a beautifully rendered piece in which she explores not only the “uses of sexual inversion” (women playing men, men playing women, and “men playing women who were playing men”) in early modern France but also the larger importance of “play” with the image of “the unruly woman” in literature, popular festivity, and everyday life.²² But my personal interest in the unruly woman was rooted elsewhere. Among the most vivid memories of my adolescence in the 1960s were those moments when my mother and grandmother both happened to be present during one of my emotional outbursts and responded by uttering in unison, “Oh, Sarah Bernhardt! There she goes again.” Other Jewish women of my generation reported being told by their mothers: “Don’t be such as Sarah Bernhardt!” Or “Don’t pull a Sarah Bernhardt.” As one woman put it, “it never occurred to us that Sarah Bernhardt had long been dead.” In the folklore of her Jewish family, Bernhardt was “somewhat of a *dybbuk*, inhabiting our souls, controlling our behavior . . . all we had to do was rid ourselves of her.”²³

My book *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (2000) is not a biography of Sarah Bernhardt but a study of how she and other highly paid and influential female performers helped to define the modern sexual and social terrain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Well before the term *feminism* entered the American lexicon, I argue, female performers were acting out—both on stage and in their professional careers—two of the central tenets claimed by women who called themselves feminists in the 1910s. One was the demand that women be given greater freedom to express their sexuality. The other was the demand that women be free to express an independent selfhood. Known in her own time as “the most self-advertised woman in the world,” the French/Catholic/Jewish Bernhardt was a classically trained actress and financially successful international celebrity who made nine American tours between 1880 and 1918, playing crying, dying courtesans, usurping parts written for men, and performing male roles that were written expressly for her. On and off the stage, Bernhardt promoted an image of herself as a high-strung, egotistical, individualistic female rebel, eager to flout convention at every turn. Thus she provided her numerous female fans in the United States, including activists in the suffrage movement, with a compelling example of how a female rebel might successfully invent (and play a

starring role in) a new public drama of personal freedom. For that reason, she also set the standard to which other female performers, including the loud, eccentric, unruly, sexually transgressive comics on the vaudeville stage, would aspire.

[25]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*



Susan
A. Glenn

Seeing (and Not Seeing) the “Jewishness” of American Feminism

Female Spectacle devoted considerable attention to how performers in this period, including Bernhardt, played with and against Jewishness. But unlike my first book, it is not primarily a work of Jewish history. In this sense, *Female Spectacle* was like so many other books written by Jewish scholars who tackled transcendent issues of gender or feminist history but did not situate their topics within the frameworks of Jewish history. In the past decade or so that has changed. The more recent “now” seems to demand a closer attention to what is Jewish in the broader history of American women and their social and political movements. By the end of the 1990s, Jewish feminist scholars were asking penetrating questions about why Jewish women’s participation in the wave of feminist activism that swept the United States in the 1960s and 1970s remained largely invisible in the historiography of feminism when so many of the women who participated in that movement came from Jewish backgrounds. Paula Hyman observed in 1997 that “avoidance of Judaism was characteristic of American ideological and political culture in the late 1960s.” Among feminists, wrote Hyman, “this reticence was reinforced by the presumption that gender trumped all other aspects of identity.” In her view, both antisemitism and anti-Zionism within the women’s movement combined with universalism to discourage open discussions about Jewish difference within the larger American feminist movement.²⁴

But the question that remained unasked at the end of the 1990s was: Could or should the larger history of feminism in the United States—in both its working-class and middle-class dimensions—be told as a *Jewish* story?²⁵ And if so, what kinds of evidence would be needed to support the production of a new kind of Jewish feminist knowledge? In 2009, in response to an essay by Hasia Diner and Tony Michels about the invisibility of Jews in American historiography, David Hollinger, who is neither Jewish nor a feminist, declared that we needed no new “empirical” evidence to substantiate the claim that the post–World War II feminist movement in the United States “was largely led by women of Jewish ancestry” who were for the most part

“secular” in their “orientation.” He then asked why some histories of the movement, including those written by Jewish women, declined even to “signpost” the word “Jew” in the index. This was a reference to Ruth Rosen’s *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed the World* (2000), which did in fact point out that in the 1960s, many young feminists “came from secular working-class Jewish activist families.”²⁶ Hollinger, a proponent of so-called postethnic and post-Jewish scholarship, complained that “like so many social historians of the last generation or two,” Rosen “is sensitive to the demographic composition of social movements, except when it comes to identifying Jews.” This was not an exercise in shaming so much as a call for feminist scholars and other academics to write histories that directly engaged how and why Jewish women (and men), including some feminists and some feminist historians, adopted a universalist, cosmopolitan stance and how this too was an important aspect of what it meant to be Jewish.²⁷

The next year, in a very different kind of essay about the problem of invisibility, the historian Daniel Horowitz—author of the 1998 biography *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique*, a book that revealed Friedan’s own anxiety not only about revealing her ties to the Old Left but also her Jewish identity—revised Joan Scott’s call to make gender a “category of analysis” by suggesting that the invisibility of Jews in the historiography of 1960s feminism could be addressed if scholars opted to “make Jewishness a category to be recognized or analyzed.”²⁸ Horowitz’s essay appeared in a volume on Jewish women in the 1950s whose title, *The Jewish Feminine Mystique*, signaled a new direction in the production of historical knowledge about American feminism, one that emphasized Jews and “Jewishness.”²⁹

The emerging scholarship that uses Jewishness as a category of analysis is now proceeding along two distinct paths. One path, illustrated by Melissa Klapper’s 2013 book *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women’s Activism, 1890–1940*, directs our attention to Jews *within* the broader feminist movement. The other path, illustrated by Joyce Antler’s *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (2018), brings us to an examination of the radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s as a distinctively Jewish movement.

Klapper’s book is a groundbreaking study of what feminism meant for the middle-class Jewish reformers who joined the early twentieth-century suffrage, birth control, and peace movements and how their sense of themselves as Jewish women mattered to their activism. She argues that Jewish women participated in these movements to fulfill their idealistic social visions. But their involvement also provided

a “path toward Americanization.” Her decision to explore Jewish activists alongside and in relationship to their non-Jewish counterparts, rather than in isolation, makes it possible to see what was and was not unique about Jewish women’s feminism and allows her to analyze the “multiple Jewish sensibilities” that propelled women toward feminism. Klapper argues that Jewish women formed “conditional alliances” with others across the barriers of class, culture, ethnicity, and religion (and far less often, race).³⁰ She also shows how Jewish women navigated the deep strains of antisemitism within these movements and argues that in the 1930s, when antisemitism intensified on both sides of the Atlantic, Jewish feminists turned away from universalist ideals of peace “toward the particular protection of Jewish rights.”³¹

Antler’s *Jewish Radical Feminism* reveals that it took decades for many Jewish women active in the radical movement of the 1960s and 1970s to embrace the “Jewish influences” that contributed to their activism. For others, the question of how Jewish (used here as both an adjective and a noun) the feminist movement was never came to the fore. Based in large part on interviews with 40 women, some of them historians, who were active in various aspects of the women’s movement from the 1960s to the 1980s, *Jewish Radical Feminism* reveals that in the 1960s many activists tried to downplay or ignore their Jewish heritage. “None of us talked about how many of us were Jewish” was a common refrain among the feminists whom Antler interviewed for her book, and many did not “even think of *themselves* as Jewish.”³² What Antler’s book aims to demonstrate is “Jewish women’s impact on the [feminist] movement *as Jews*.”³³

The first study to seriously grapple with the complex and contradictory ways that Jewishness and feminism both diverged and intersected, Antler’s book argues for the interrelatedness of two seemingly discrete strands of Jewish feminist politics: the largely secular “women’s liberation” movement of the late 1960s and the “more self-consciously identified ‘Jewish feminist’ movement” that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s among both “religiously and secularly identified Jews,” including Jewish lesbians, who attempted to “transform ideas about and practices of gender within and beyond the Jewish community.”³⁴ Antler argues that even though many of the secular feminists in the women’s liberation movement “never talked about” their feelings about being Jewish and viewed their activism as “fundamentally one of gender rebellion,” this too was “also about an intergenerational Jewish legacy” passed on through parents, who in some cases were also left-wing Jewish “rebels.”³⁵

[27]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*

•
Susan
A. Glenn

But Antler's book is more than a history of Jews and feminism; it is a Jewish feminist reclamation project devoted to the recovery of previously suppressed forms of Jewish memory. "In their fight against patriarchy," writes Antler, "they were gender universalists who did not prioritize, or even recognize their ethnic origins as a claim on the most inclusive concerns of sisterhood." Not until the period of ethnic revival decades later did some, but not all, Jewish feminists begin to "deliberately associate themselves with Jewish influences that contributed to their activism." For others, observes Antler, "it was the conference [on Women's Liberation and Jewish Identity] I convened in 2011 at NYU and the probing interviews I conducted with them that belatedly summoned up these associations" or, as Vivian Rothstein reported, actually "'instigated' these connections."³⁶ If the 2011 conference had liberated the repressed memory of Jewishness among some conference participants, Antler's 2018 book liberated feminist history from what some Jewish feminists saw as the thrall of universalism. In *Jewish Radical Feminism*, as in Antler's 1997 book *A Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped America*, the culmination of Jewish women's activism is "the journey home" to Jewishness.³⁷

Antler has opened our eyes to how activists in the 1960s and 1970s struggled with the vexed meanings of their own Jewish upbringing and how Jewish self-consciousness (in both the positive and negative senses) informed the feminisms of Jewish women. We can now "see" and "know" the previously buried dimensions of feminism's history. It seems to me, however, that one challenge going forward will be to avoid hiving off the study of Jewish women from the larger surround of American history while still paying attention to the question of when, whether, and how consciousness of Jewish difference has mattered and to whom.

Alice Kessler-Harris's 2012 book *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* provides an important model of how to keep the larger surround in focus. In this book, Kessler-Harris presents what she calls a thinking-through of the controversial playwright's "relationship to the twentieth century."³⁸ In the process, she shows us something important about "what it meant to live as a Jew, a southerner, a writer at a time when these identities all carried gender, economic, and political connotations," connotations that Hellman herself "only half understood and sometimes explicitly rejected."³⁹ A range of "ugly" stereotypes followed Hellman from the 1950s to her grave and beyond: unrepentant "Stalinist," "hypocrite," "liar," self-righteous "moralist" who accused her contemporaries of being "scoundrels"

for not standing up to McCarthyism, and “self-hating Jew” who had refused to denounce Soviet antisemitism or to pledge loyalty to Israel. Would Hellman’s reputation have suffered to this extent if she were not a woman? Kessler-Harris’s answer is no. She argues that the visceral characterizations of Hellman’s “perverse” politics were accompanied by equally visceral accusations about Hellman’s “perverse” sexuality. “It wasn’t just that she slept with men,” writes Kessler-Harris, it was that she “slept with whomever she pleased, and then remained friends with them afterward.”⁴⁰ Hellman nevertheless became a useful figure to the late twentieth-century feminists who embraced her as a “heroine to women.” Ironically, writes Kessler-Harris, Hellman “had never wanted to be identified as a ‘woman playwright’” and was deeply at odds with what she viewed as the lack of political seriousness among the rising generation of feminists, who, she claimed, overlooked her politics and viewed her through the lens of her literary and professional accomplishments in a world dominated by men.⁴¹

Hellman’s story is significant in other ways. It reveals that not all feminist histories end with “the journey home.” Lillian Hellman may have been uniquely “difficult.” Nevertheless, her example points to the possibilities of a new historiographical agenda—one that brings more attention to the lives of “difficult” people who refused to conform to what others, including other women, other Jews, and other Americans expected of them and how their choices might yield new insights into Jewish history, the history of feminism, and the history of the United States.

[29]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*

•
Susan
A. Glenn

Notes

- 1 Antoinette Burton, “‘History’ Is Now: Feminist Theory and the Production of Historical Feminisms,” *Women’s History Review* 1 (1992): 26.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 26, 30.
- 3 Melissa R. Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920* (New York, 2007), 6, 3.
- 4 Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle, 1995). Other examples include Elizabeth Israels Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (New York, 1987); Selma Berrol, “Class or Ethnicity: The Americanized German Jewish Woman and Her Middle Class Sisters in 1895,” *Jewish Social Studies* 47, no. 1 (1985): 21–32; and Beth S. Wenger, “Jewish

- Women of the Club: The Changing Public Role of Atlanta's Jewish Women (1870–1930)," *American Jewish History* 76, no. 3 (1987): 311–33.
- [30] 5 Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: An Historical Overview* (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1981).
- Jewish Social Studies* 6 Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union," *Labor History* 17, no. 1 (1976): 13. See also Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where Are the Organized Women Workers," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1 (1975): 92–110.
- 7 Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable," 23.
- Vol. 24 8 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).
- No. 2 9 Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 2–3. On married women who acted in the name of the ethnic community, see Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (1980): 91–105.
- 10 Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), 6.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Oz Frankel, "Whatever Happened to Red Emma? Emma Goldman, from Alien Rebel to American Icon," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (1996): 919–20.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 The phrase "Bad Girl Emma" is from Frankel, "Whatever Happened?"
- 15 Alix Kates Shulman, preface to *To the Barricades: The Anarchist Life of Emma Goldman* (New York, 1971), vii.
- 16 See, for example, Gerald Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880–1920* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), and David Waldstreicher, "Radicalism, Religion, Jewishness: The Case of Emma Goldman," *American Jewish History* 80, no. 1 (1990): 74–92.
- 17 Frankel, "Whatever Happened?," 936–37.
- 18 "Candace Falk on Emma Goldman," undated interview, ca. 1984, <https://www.waste.org/~roadrunner/ScarletLetterArchives/BlackRose/BR11/FalkOnGoldmanINTERVIEW.htm>. See also Karen Rosenberg, "Emma's Ambiguous Legacy," *Women's Review of Books* 2, no. 2 (1984): 8.
- 19 Joan Wallach Scott's foundational essay is "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–57. On the performativity of gender, see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31, and *idem*, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), among others. On the "corporeal turn" in Jewish Studies, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Corporeal Turn," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 447–61. On queer theory and gendered stereotypes, see Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York, 2003).

- 20 Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston, 1999), 3.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 241. See also Joyce Antler, *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (Hanover, N.H., 1998).
- 22 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 129.
- 23 Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 1.
- 24 Paula E. Hyman, *Jewish Feminism Faces the American Women's Movement: Convergence and Divergence* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), reprinted in Deborah Dash Moore, ed., *American Jewish Identity Politics* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2008), 224.
- 25 I am broadening a question first posed by David Hollinger with regard to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. See David Hollinger, "Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era," *American Jewish History* 95, no. 1 (2009): 8.
- 26 Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York, 2000), 46.
- 27 David Hollinger, "Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches," 8. The same issue of *American Jewish History* contained responses by Hasia Diner, Tony Michels, and Paula E. Hyman. Hollinger's essay was itself a response to Hasia Diner and Tony Michels, "Considering American Jewish History," *OAH Newsletter* 35, no. 4 (2007): 9, 18, a commentary on the invisibility of Jewish history in the field of U.S. history.
- 28 Daniel Horowitz, "Jewish Women Remaking American Feminism / Women Remaking American Judaism: Reflections on the Life of Betty Friedan," in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique*, ed. Hasia Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson (New Brunswick, N.J., 2010), 246.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 245–46.
- 30 Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women's Activism, 1890–1940* (New York, 2013), 11–15, 204.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 32 Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York, 2018), 147 (italics in original).
- 33 *Ibid.*, 2 (italics in original).
- 34 *Ibid.*, 3, 8.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 6. Prior to the publication of Antler's book, the history of feminism within Judaism had largely been treated as its own topic. See, for example, Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889–1985* (Boston, 1998); and Riv-Ellen Prell, ed., *Women Remaking American Judaism* (Detroit, 2007).
- 36 Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 350. An earlier example of memory work that relied upon oral history to excavate the awareness of Jewishness

[31]

*Writing the
Feminist Past*

●

Susan
A. Glenn

among 1960s female activists is Deborah L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2001).

- [32] 37 Ellen DuBois had raised the question whether Antler's 1997 book, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century*, appeared to provide a "short-handed" endorsement of the kind of "identity politics" that represented a potential "trap" for Jewish feminists by implying that there was "one historical path that is genuine for Jewish American women seeking to be true to themselves." Ellen Carol DuBois, "The Anxiety of Assimilation," *Women's Review of Books* 14, no. 8 (May 1997): 5–6.
- Jewish
Social
Studies
●
Vol. 24
No. 2
- 38 Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* (New York, 2012), 2–3.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 350–51.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 280–82.

SUSAN A. GLENN is professor of history at the University of Washington and a faculty affiliate in the Jewish Studies Program at the Jackson School of International Studies. She is the author of *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (1990), which won the American Historical Association's Joan Kelly Memorial Prize, and of *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (2000). She is also the coeditor of *Boundaries of Jewish Identity* (2010). glenns@uw.edu

Copyright of Jewish Social Studies is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.