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## UC Irvine Previously Published Works

### Title

Interchange: Women's Suffrage, the Nineteenth Amendment, and the Right to Vote

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3hb7q9m3>

### Journal

Journal of American History, 106(3)

### ISSN

0021-8723

### Authors

DuBois, Ellen Carol

Gidlow, Liette

Jones, Martha S

et al.

### Publication Date

2019-12-01

### DOI

10.1093/jahist/jaz506

Peer reviewed

## Tavola rotonda

### *Transnational gender talk*

a cura di Giulia Cioci

interventi di Eileen Boris, Francisca de Haan, Leila J. Rupp

Nell'ultimo ventennio, l'affermazione in prospettiva transnazionale della Storia delle donne e di Genere ha innescato un articolato e al contempo attrattivo percorso di transizione storiografica con la conseguente espansione di questo filone di studi. Coerentemente con le tematiche proposte in questo numero monografico, le pagine che seguono pubblicano una tavola rotonda incentrata su quattro principali punti di domanda finalizzati a una riflessione sia sulle variegate applicazioni e sulle criticità della Transnational Gender History (TGH) sia sul complesso utilizzo della categoria di genere al di là dei confini nazionali che – infine ma non ultimo – sulle metodologie e sugli strumenti utili all'avanzamento della ricerca. Hanno accolto l'invito a partecipare a questo scambio Eileen Boris, Francisca de Haan e Leila J. Rupp, tre storiche da tempo impegnate in questo ambito di studi. Proprio sulla base della loro significativa esperienza, esse evidenziano come la sovrapposizione di diverse categorie d'analisi, fra le tante quelle prevalenti di genere, classe e razza, se posta in dialogo con la dimensione globale, possa conferire profondità alla comprensione delle strutture di potere – dentro e fuori lo stato/nazione –, dei processi “universali” di inclusione ed esclusione, delle disuguaglianze tra il Nord e il Sud del mondo, tra l'Occidente e l'altro da sé. Se l'attraversamento dei confini racchiude privilegi e studiarne sviluppi e tendenze permette di cogliere vari livelli di subordinazione, l'approccio intersezionale, attestandosi quale paradigma di complessità, può contribuire a problematizzare la ricerca storica ma può anche scontrarsi con le attuali minacce etero-normative e patriarcali, inscrite nel tradizionale binarismo di genere.

Spazio e tempo sono elementi condivisi dalle donne di diverse realtà geopolitiche e con maggiore frequenza convergono nelle ricostruzioni di impronta transnazionale. Sulla scorta dell'aggiornamento storiografico, la

produzione di Storie sintetiche e particolareggiate ha favorito l'ampliamento di una conoscenza di contesto che – come rilevano le autrici dei contributi dati a questa tavola rotonda –, può semplificare la ricerca su scala globale, coinvolgente e al tempo stesso insidiosa per le difficoltà metodologiche, oltre che per le capacità linguistiche e finanziarie che essa richiede. Come emerge nelle riflessioni che seguono, ovviano a tali ostacoli salde strutture accademiche, supporti allo studio, progetti collettivi quali quelli sviluppati dall'International Federation for Research in Women's History (IFRWH), solo per citare uno fra i soggetti promotori di un periodico collegamento tra studiose – oltre che un più largo accesso alle virtuose iniziative digitali offerte dal web, ma non ancora capillari in tutti i continenti. Da qualsiasi punto la si guardi la Storia transnazionale avanza rischi, tensioni, complicazioni. Eileen Boris, Francisca de Haan e Leila J. Rupp suggeriscono, tuttavia, alcune possibili strade per la ricerca e lasciano affiorare spiragli entro i quali una comunità scientifica aperta e dinamica possa agevolare la circolazione delle conoscenze acquisite, la comparazione storica e una graduale implementazione di studi locali, quanto più inseriti in un'ampia bibliografia internazionale.

*1. Transnational Gender History is currently at the centre of a global debate fed by both theoretical and empirical research. What fresh meanings would you attribute to this field of research, and what are the features that define the transnational character of this history?*

**E. Boris:** The transnational turn in Women's and Gender history gained increased vibrancy at the end of the twentieth century for three reasons. First, new questions emerged from external factors: a growing worldwide awareness and protests against multinational capital, big oil, sweated labor, and the widening global supply chain; intensified dispossession of peoples and denigration of lands; transnational migration from political conflict and for livelihoods. Indeed, the migrant mother and care worker replaced the male construction laborer as the prototypical sender of remittances earned abroad to households left behind. Similarly, daughters and mothers dominated the workforce of ever relocating garment, electronics, and consumer goods production. Feminized labor represented a precariousness that hit the Global West (and also, with the demise of state socialism, Eastern Europe) as well as the Global South. Second, trends within historical studies pushed this direction, including the need to account for contemporary events that propelled the displacing of Western civili-

zation and courses organized around national chronologies with Global History and the History of Empires. Big data history encouraged a broader geographical reach; comparative history raised questions of trends, similarities, and differences over time and space. Practitioners combined cultural approaches in reinvigorating social, economic, intellectual, and political analysis. Projects grew beyond national boundaries, as when the US-based Women and Social Movements document initiative added Women and Social Movements International. Meanwhile, English language journals like *The Journal of Women's History*, *Gender and History*, *Women's History Review*, *Signs*, and those outside of Anglo-America, like *Nora* and *Aspasia*, circulated studies more broadly even as they reflected language hegemony and power differentials in resources and institutional support that privileged English speakers. Third, gender theorists and gender and women's historians partook of increased mobilities by strengthening transnational networks through new organizations like the IFRWH and the Feminist Labor History Working Group of the European Labor History Network (ELHN); they developed an expanded international presence at national venues like the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Meeting together, reading work originating elsewhere, stimulated the field to move beyond the nation state. Some found an useable past in suffragists, labor feminists, socialists, anti-colonialists, imperialists, and other campaigners who had formed their own transnational connections before World War I.

Going transnational broke through national assumptions about normative gender. Historical research exposed how central concepts of the old Western-based women's history – the domestic ideal, male breadwinning, gender binary, and white femininity – were class, race, and place bound. In concert with colonial, postcolonial, and subaltern studies, historians further complicated the transnational by documenting multiple lines of influence, such as when settler colonialists encountered indigenous communities, who became crucial to their survival, and colonial administrators and missionaries in Africa and Asia schooled women in proper homemaking as their counterparts were doing in London and New York among immigrants. I joined those feminist historians who began to interrogate international organizations, including institutions of global governance, NGOs, and labor federations, to reveal how gender matters.

**F. de Haan:** I am not sure that I see TGH being «at the center of a global debate fed by both theoretical and empirical research». If I look at the books coming out and the main journals within the larger field of

Women's and Gender History (WGH), there rather seems to be an ongoing expansion of TGH, with accompanying reflections. Transnational History (TH) questions the presumed natural status of the nation-state, TGH queries and problematizes the historical constructions of sex and gender, and both are concerned with «issues surrounding the crossing, blurring, and transcending of borders»<sup>1</sup>, as Merry Wiesner-Hanks has aptly put it.

The IFRWH, established in 1987, has played an important role in the process of creating and advancing TGH, in two ways. First, starting with its initial meeting in the summer of 1989, by bringing together scholars from around the world – when this was still an innovative thing to do – and publishing a successful anthology based on that first meeting<sup>2</sup>; secondly by the organization of its subsequent congresses – twelve between 1990 and 2018 – and the books and special journal issues that have come out<sup>3</sup>. Obviously the IFRWH was and is not the only actor here<sup>4</sup>, but it has been influential in internationalizing the field of WGH and advancing a transnational approach, and therefore it is interesting to compare the approaches taken over time in the books published under its aegis.

The first book, *Writing Women's History, International Perspectives*, included essays by scholars from twenty-two countries, and aimed «to consider the achievements and trace the future trajectories of women's history from different national and cultural perspectives»<sup>5</sup>. This was followed by *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, which provided critical gendered readings of histories of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism<sup>6</sup>. Next came *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*<sup>7</sup>, with a clear focus on the history of the struggles for women's human rights. Several chapters explored the links between imperialism and feminisms, and these and some other chapters used a transnational approach, but the term “transna-

<sup>1</sup> M.E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Crossing Borders in Transnational Gender History*, in «Journal of Global History», 2011, vol. 6, n. 3, p. 359.

<sup>2</sup> K.M. Offen *et al.* (eds), *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991.

<sup>3</sup> International Federation for Research in Women's History (ifrwh.com).

<sup>4</sup> Historians influential in developing global and transitional WGH include Bonnie G. Smith and Merry Wiesner-Hanks.

<sup>5</sup> Offen *et al.*, *Writing Women's History*, cit., p. xix.

<sup>6</sup> R. Roach Pierson, Nupur Chaudhuri, B. McAuley (eds), *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998.

<sup>7</sup> P. Grimshaw, K. Holmes, M. Lake (eds), *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*, Palgrave, New York 2001.

tional” appeared only occasionally (xix) and without further reflection on it. The following book coming out of an IFRWH conference had “global” as the keyword in its title<sup>8</sup>. The editors used then the generally accepted definitions of “international” and “transnational”<sup>9</sup>, but mainly argued for a postcolonial, global approach, one that acknowledges “the global interconnections” and «complex entanglements in which we are all implicated»<sup>10</sup>. The 2016 volume *Women in Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global* combined both perspectives by emphasizing the co-constitution of the local and the global with new perspectives on globalization<sup>11</sup>.

The most recent book in this series is the volume edited by Eileen Boris, Sandra Trudgen Dawson, and Barbara Molony<sup>12</sup>, which is innovative in several ways. First, by adding in a meaningful way the sphere of the “intimate” to the transnational domain<sup>13</sup>; secondly, by arguing convincingly that both gendered/sexual and political transnational actions can be understood as transgressions, because they posed «challenges to hegemonic norms and to the power of patriarchies», and thirdly by highlighting that this work is now inspired and undergirded by «transnational feminist theory»<sup>14</sup>. All in all, it seems to me that through the lens of the books published by the IFRWH since 1991, we can see a clear process of expansion of feminist international and transnational historical writing, which also has become more complex and self-consciously theoretical.

**L.J. Rupp:** The first question we have to ask is what do we mean by «transnational gender history»? It involves understanding what we mean by “transnational”, which, we might agree, refers to interactions among

<sup>8</sup> F. de Haan et al. (eds), *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, Women's and Gender History, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY 2013.

<sup>9</sup> De Haan et al., *Women's Activism*, cit., Introduction, note 10.

<sup>10</sup> A quote from L. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others*, in «American Anthropologist», 2002, vol. 104, n. 3, pp. 783-790.

<sup>11</sup> C. Midgley, A. Twells, J. Carlier (eds), *Women in Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY 2016, pp. 1-5.

<sup>12</sup> E. Boris, S. Trudgen Dawson, B. Molony (eds), *Engendering Transnational Transgressions: From the Intimate to the Global*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Note that “bodies” have for longer been the focus of postcolonial or world history scholarship, see M.L. Roberts, *The Transnationalization of Gender History*, in «History and Theory», October 2005, n. 44, pp. 456-468.

<sup>14</sup> Boris et al., *Engendering Transnational Transgressions*, cit., Introduction, defined on pp. 2-3.

people, groups, organizations, and movements across national borders. Trickier is the question of “gender” in relation to “transnational”. “Gender history” is a term that originated in “women’s history” and expanded to include not only the history of men and masculinity, but also the very concept of gender. “Gender”, of course, refers to the socially produced understandings of the signs associated with femaleness and maleness, leaving combinations or extensions or changes or refusals in categories of “third gender”, “transgender”, or “non-binary”. So, putting this all together, “transnational gender history” includes research into interactions across national borders around issues of gender, comparisons across national borders of gendered phenomena, and potentially a whole range of novel topics yet to be identified.

“Transnational” is a more limited term than “global”, which is also used to describe research that transcends national borders. Obviously, no research can be global in the sense of incorporating every corner of the world, but a global perspective can open up new questions and ways of viewing gender history. Transnational gender history includes comparative research on more than one nation, while global gender history has broader ambitions. Theoretical approaches to global history, rather than empirical, are more feasible.

One of the problems that beset women’s history decades ago – the very nature of the category “woman” – troubles transnational gender history in even more complex ways. Is the category of gender too essentialized, even if we understand that genders vary across cultures? Is even putting different things into interaction or comparison with each other problematic? Is it possible to get away from a westernized imperialistic gender against which everything else is compared or measured? There are no simple answers to these questions, but they challenge us to approach transnational gender history with great care.

With all these caveats in mind, what transnational gender history can offer is a sense of commonalities and differences across time and place, which helps us to understand the structures and conditions that shape human experience. Genders are produced through interactions in particular historical contexts, so transnational gender history contributes to better histories and to a better understanding of genders in contemporary societies.

*2. For more than a decade now, scholars have analysed the question of the “transnational turn” in history. Do you think that Gender Studies are part of this transitional process? Has a transition already occurred, or are there certain issues that still need to be resolved, and gaps that need to be bridged, before we can consider this transition achieved? What contradictions or risks does Transnational Gender History have to defend itself against?*

**E. Boris:** Women and Gender Studies made the transnational turn at least three decades ago following the internationalization of women’s movements after the UN conferences on women and subsequent ties across national boundaries. We have led rather than followed historical studies. However, the backlash against gender by rising authoritarianism around the world jeopardizes this project. At the August 2018 conference of IFRWH, for example, we renewed a conversation whether to add “gender” to our name, a move that would require extensive consultation with allied groups from around the world before any subsequent action. Scholars from a number of countries warned that such a change was politically dangerous, a reason that others wished to act to challenge a mounting worldwide assault on what opponents misname as “gender ideology” as part of an attempt to stifle academic autonomy and restrict inquiry. By “gender ideology”, opponents claim that the study of gender is not “scientific”; thus, it does not belong in the university. In the US, right-wing politicians have stepped up crusades against critical race studies and gender studies, seeking to prohibit discussions of sexual orientation in the public schools and introducing anti-transgender bills in terms of athletics, bathrooms, and medical care. After the Supreme Court struck down the right to abortion, these same forces have sought to criminalize that procedure and endanger reproductive health. Meanwhile, some states have sought to restrict academic freedom by eliminating tenure or blocking university funding of Women and Gender Studies.

We know that anti-democratic forces frequently portray themselves as upholders of traditional values, especially the hetero-normative and patriarchal family. Exacerbating economic and political uncertainty were changes in the status and public activity of women, non-binary, and transgender people, including entrance into previously male-defined occupations, attempts to control their own reproductive bodies, and efforts to define their own sexuality. Meanwhile, the spread of ideas with the compression of time and space that marks twenty-first century globalization has encouraged transnational communities of scholars, not in the least, femi-

nist, women's and gender researchers. Added to that, comes the emergence of global feminism as a South-South and not only North-South or West-East conversation. Finally, gender theory does challenge those who see the world only in binary terms. This dispute is not merely academic; it is embodied in the presence of people whose gender does not match dichotomous divisions. These transgender and gender-queer individuals are demanding rights, respect, and recognition, which religious and social conservatives reject. The results are deadly: not only for individuals denied gender-affirming care and subject to mass shootings and other violence, but to the practice of transnational gender scholarship through intimidations.

Not all attacks come from outside the academy, however. In September 2022, the President of the American Historical Association decried presentism in historical writing, rejecting scholarship on gender and sexuality as well as race, nationalism, and capitalism for interjecting contemporary concerns into the study of the past. The nearly wholesale condemnation of his remarks suggests that historians accept that exploring the interaction of past and present belongs on our agenda.

**F. de Haan:** Undoubtedly Gender Studies is part of and has contributed to the “transnational turn” in history, if only because feminist historians do not operate in a separate universe. Merry Wiesner-Hanks in her influential 2011 article, researched the mutual intersection of Transnational History and Transnational Gender History (note the unevenness in the terms). She found a distinct lack of articles on women, gender or sexuality in the «Journal of Global History» in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and a slightly better result in the number of articles with a “global history” (her quotation marks) topic in the «Journal of Women's History», but also noted that «exciting scholarship that draws on both transnational history and the history of gender and sexuality is beginning to appear», especially in six fields: Movements for women's and gay rights; Diverse understandings of sexuality and gender; Colonialism and imperialism; Intermarriage; National identity and citizenship; and Migration<sup>15</sup>. Undoubtedly the research in these fields has continued to expand significantly during the last decade, and still does, partly related to the emphasis in the last few years on the need to develop de-colonial perspectives<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, three additional comments: although transnational and

<sup>15</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Crossing Borders*, cit., p. 364.

<sup>16</sup> W. Mignolo, C.E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis*, Duke University Press, Durham 2018.

global history are more widely practiced than one or two decades ago, the nation-state remains the privileged and largely unquestioned center of most historiography; while both TH and TGH continue to expand, TGH is not always adequately represented<sup>17</sup>; regardless, even if we make some inroads, I don't think such a thing as an "achieved" transition exists. History writing is a never-ending *process*, with developments, new directions, and so on, but always multivocal, with more and less conservative and progressive approaches.

**L.J. Rupp:** It is true that history has traditionally been structured around nation states or regions. Especially in the United States, transnational history has presented a challenge to the ways history as a discipline is viewed, most importantly in terms of the ways academic positions are defined and students are trained. Positions are advertised as "U.S. History", with particular chronological specifics; "European history" or the history of particular countries or regions within Europe, also with specified time periods; and the rest of the world is divided into regions or particular countries, but most often continents, with sometimes a chronological limit. This standard organization applies also to all the other ways the discipline of history is structured (think journals, conferences). So while history has embraced the "transnational turn" in the sense of recognizing the importance of transnational history, this doesn't mean that doing transnational history is all that easy.

It's hard to me not to turn here to my own experience. I began my training in German history, became fascinated by women's history, which had a much more robust, but still limited, appearance in U.S. history, and ended up writing my dissertation, which became my first book, on the mobilization of women during the Second World War in Germany and the United States<sup>18</sup>. I applied for jobs in both German/European and U.S.

<sup>17</sup> A case in point is the 2017 809-page volume *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis / International History in Theory and Practice*, which has one chapter out of twenty-six with a focus on women and/or gender. See F. de Haan, *Writing Inter/Transnational History: The Case of Women's Movements and Feminisms*, in B. Haider-Wilson *et al.* (eds), *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis / International History in Theory and Practice*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna 2017, pp. 501-536. In addition, the chapter by Peter Becker discusses the International Woman Suffrage Alliance and efforts to end the traffic in girls ("Mädchenhandel") in the context of the Habsburg Monarchy's dealing with the new internationalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>18</sup> L.J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1978.

history, as well as the limited possibilities in women's history, and the general response I received was along the lines of «comparative history is great, but we need a specialist in [fill in the blank] history». I said at the time, in the late 1970s, that history beyond the nation state was the wave of the future, but I waited a long time for that to be at least somewhat the case. I do see history as having taken a transnational turn in the sense that research more frequently reaches beyond national borders or takes a global perspective on important historical questions. Nevertheless, it is true that the discipline of history is still primarily organized around nation states or regions of the world, despite the emergence of the field of global history and openness to and real growth of transnational history. The “transnational turn” or “transition” does not mean that the discipline as a whole has moved from national or regional to transnational history. It is more that transnational and global history now has a place in the discipline, marked by positions and journals and conferences, all the accouterments of a recognized field.

Gender history and gender studies are in some ways naturals for the transnational turn. Scholars working on gender history in a particular national arena, at least in the early days, were aware of the literature on other countries simply because there was so little to read. As the field of women's history developed, influenced by research and theory from other disciplines and the emerging field of women's studies, questions about the relationship of gender to production and reproduction, along with the concept of patriarchy, had the potential to transcend national borders. At the same time, the exploration of patriarchy in different times and places could lead to (or draw from) an essentialized notion of women (or men or other genders). The biggest risk for transnational gender history and gender studies is this connection to essentialism, which can also impose a Western/global Northern/Euro American model on the rest of the world.

*3. Among the theoretical and methodological practices adopted in Gender Studies, an intersectional approach is called for, in order to grasp the various levels of women's subordination in contemporary societies. In your areas of studies, what specific categories or paradigms would you identify as being essential for Transnational History, and which lines of research are currently being pursued in regard to transnational gender relations?*

**E. Boris:** By combining intersectionality with transnationalism, we can tease out the complicated interplay of gender ideologies with racial

and geopolitical factors that exploded with various liberation struggles and have exposed the limits of formal equality. As someone trained as an interdisciplinary historian of the United States, albeit a premature gender and trans-Atlantic one, racial capitalism and the afterlife of enslavement of Africans in the Americas were central to my understanding of politics and society. So too were the legacies of settler colonialism and imperialism. Using the International Labor Organization (ILO) as my archive in *Making the Woman Worker* (2019), I had to figure how to translate or apply understandings grounded in the US Black feminist concept of intersectionality to a study that was operating as conceptual and institutional history on an international, transnational, and global scale. For we cannot assume that race or difference functions exactly the same or that class becomes the under-theorized component of intersectionality as it often is in feminist writing in the United States. Intersectional analysis pointed me to comparison and contrast between women, not only various material challenges but also tensions between those in the West or Global North and those in what was called the “Third world”, the Global South, and the state socialist nations or the East. I turned to geography and the operations of colonialism, the differential labor standards for non-metropolitan or dependent territories, including the instruments that came to be known as the “native” labor conventions – especially the limits of the ILO’s initial “forced labor” one – to show how racialized gender played out globally. Intersectionality demanded to problematize who spoke for “woman” or determined “universality”.

Along the way, I came across a dedicated group of feminist development economists whose analytical lenses remained applicable for the transnational study of gender. They recast the meaning of work by looking at the daily labors of subsistence undertaken by women in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In standard accounting, such rural women appeared as casualties of underdevelopment, denizens of the informal sector, and victims of traditional society. But their labor was essential. Unremunerated labor also became a key term of analysis, enhanced by the concept of social reproduction – a concept that breaks through the division between income generation and household maintenance to reveal the unproductive housewife as a Victorian construct. In the twenty-first century, informality reigns.

But not all labor is reproductive or deemed worthy, even if undertaken for survival or even pleasure. In this regard, the rethinking of sex work and trafficking has generated a thread among gender scholars, especially those of us concerned with migration, that offers insights into the larger work-

ings of transnational networks and linkages between sending and receiving nations. An intersectional perspective allows for a more nuanced notion of protection that questions who and what is protected when race, citizenship, gender, and class can over-determine who may walk the streets without police or passerby harassment. Protection – whether from violence or workplace exploitation – is meaningless for the excluded; intersectionality complicates labor standards.

**F. de Haan:** It is certainly the case that an intersectional approach is used much more widely by feminist historians than some years ago, and that there is less focus in Women's and Gender History on gender as a stand-alone category. I would add that an intersectional perspective is not only relevant to explore and make visible «women's subordination», but equally matters to examine and make visible privilege, for example of white middle-class women who could and can be successful professionals thanks to the labor of working-class or migrant women, often women of color. I would also not limit the usefulness of an intersectional approach to research about «contemporary societies». Should we not always ask questions on which categories of social organization mattered in a particular context, and about how they functioned, intersected, and possibly mutually shaped each other?

To answer the question «what specific categories or paradigms would you identify as being essential for Transnational History?» I would like to return to Eileen Boris *et al's* edited volume<sup>19</sup>. As mentioned above, I think this book makes important advances in our thinking about TGH. At the same time, it also allows me to clarify which recent developments in critical scholarship it would be useful to incorporate further in our work as transnational feminist historians, as I will do on the example of the chapter written by Giulia Cioci. That chapter aims to answers the question, «what brought left-wing, Western women to mobilize in favor of anti-colonial struggles?» and it does so by exploring the WIDF's activism during the first decades of the Cold War<sup>20</sup>. This is certainly important, and, on the basis of new source material, the chapter significantly expands our knowledge of the actual, large-scale, and multi-layered work the WIDF did to oppose colonialism and to support women in various anti-colonial strug-

<sup>19</sup> Boris *et al.*, *Engendering Transnational Transgressions*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> G. Cioci, *Transgressive Transnationalism: The Anti-Colonial Strategies in the Women's International Democratic Federation*, in Boris *et al.*, *Engendering Transnational Transgressions*, cit., pp. 221-236.

gles. However, an important part of the answer to Cioci's question consists of the «outreach and communications strategies» used by women from colonized countries, but these strategies are not considered. As a matter of fact, we know in two cases Cioci discusses that it *was* women from Vietnam and from Korea who initiated the WIDF's campaigns<sup>21</sup>. In my view, then, asking questions about the active role and the political agency and involvement of women from colonized countries or the Global South when exploring transnational activism or forms of transnational cooperation seems to be essential for critical Transnational Feminist History; the WIDF's anti-colonial work, to stay with this example, did not emanate from Western women. The recent book by Elora Shehabuddin, for me is a very inspiring study in this regard, because it exactly explores the two sides, Muslim women and “Western women”, involved in forms of feminisms since the eighteenth century, as well as their interactions, while all the time keeping in view the global inequalities that framed these women's writings, organizing, and other forms of activism<sup>22</sup>.

**L.J. Rupp:** As with all history, careful attention to intersectionality in the context of transnational gender history is vital. In research on transnational women's movements, the area I know best, the category “women” is insufficient for understanding the priorities that women of different races, ethnicities, classes, religions, sexualities, and other categories of difference brought to organizing transnationally in pursuit of equality, inclusion, and/or justice with regard to a wide range of issues. Intersectionality affects the composition of transnational movements – who is in and who is out – as well as the problems that movements address and the positions they take.

Until just relatively, the individuals and groups active in transnational women's movements have been primarily elite, white, Euro-American, and

<sup>21</sup> A. Broussan, *Unexpected Sisters in Arms: Solidarity between Vietnamese and French Leftist Women Fighting Imperialism (1945-1954)*, paper presented at the 2019 National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference in San Francisco, discusses the Vietnamese women's international «outreach and communications strategy», also discussed in F. de Haan, *The Vietnam Activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation*, in A. Sedlmaier (ed.), *Protest in the Vietnam Era*, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham 2022, pp. 51-82. It was Pak Den Ai, the leader of the Korean Democratic Women's Union, along with Hô Chông-suk, who invited the WIDF fact-finding women's commission that investigated war crimes committed during the Korean War. S. Kim, *The Origins of Cold War Feminism during the Korean War*, in «Gender and History», July 2019, vol. 31, n. 2, pp. 460-479.

<sup>22</sup> E. Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism*, University of California Press, Oakland, California 2021.

Christian. In my work on the coalition of transnational women's organizations from the late nineteenth century through the Second World War, I tried to articulate the ways that the movement, despite an articulated desire to be what they called «truly international», limited the possibilities for women of different races, ethnicities, classes, and religions to participate in transnational activism<sup>23</sup>. But it is not enough to identify exclusionary processes. We also need to explore the places and ways that a wide variety of women across the globe engaged in transnational activism. One way to do that is to focus on the regional level, or on the involvement of national groups from parts of the world further from the recognized center of power at the transnational level. A prime recent example is Katherine Marino's award-winning book, which brings Latin American and Caribbean feminists to the center of the history of international struggles for human rights<sup>24</sup>. Other works as well, such as Fiona Paisley's *Glamour in the Pacific*, focus on the involvement of women outside the Euro-American arena, creating a richer sense of the history of transnational women's movements<sup>25</sup>. Intersectionality affects the issues that emerge as critical as well as the positions that women take, so a more inclusive view can radically shift our understanding of transnational activism.

What is an absolutely central issue in transnational history in general is the global context of power dynamics, particularly the impact of imperialism on the world system. In the history of transnational women's movements, the place of nations in the world system was crucial not only in determining which women participated but what positions they took. This is not to say that all women from imperial powers supported the status quo. There were always individuals who opposed the policies of their own governments. But, to take one example, advocacy of peace by transnational women's organizations ran up against the struggles of countries for independence and self-determination. Bringing in the voices and activism of women from the Global South is essential for any truly transnational history. Of course, there is no simple "Global South" versus "Global North", for one's class, racial/ethnic, religious, and other marker of difference determine one's place on the global stage. Attention to the racial/

<sup>23</sup> L.J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1997.

<sup>24</sup> K.M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC 2019.

<sup>25</sup> F. Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2009.

ethnic dynamics of transnational activism is essential, as, for example, Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill's edited work makes clear<sup>26</sup>.

There is simply no way to understand transnational gender history without attention to the intersections of all the complex factors that shape the experiences of individuals, groups, and nations in the world system.

4. *The transnational approach may unnerve gender historians when dealing with "master narratives", when local realities are to be framed within a global perspective, or when research involves consulting international archives (just to mention a few initial concerns). So what do we need to include in our 'toolbox' then: what resources, instruments, networks of contacts can help and support scholars within their diverse national contexts?*

**E. Boris:** Major obstacles to practicing transnational history have come from the languages involved, the contextual knowledge required, and the cost of research. For most of its history, the ILO communicated in either English or French, though handwriting generated a hurdle to decipher the drafts staff sent to each other and between sections of the International Labour Office. My reading ability of French had atrophied over the years, but came back enough to consult Google translator or a proficient reader when I was unsure if I had caught the subtleties in a letter or other documents. For other languages, I had to rely on summaries of replies that countries sent to the Office. But I was fortunate. First, I had the resources, thanks to holding an endowed chair, to travel to Geneva, Washington, D.C. New York City, and elsewhere to consult archives. Second, I found a community of like-minded scholars who, rather than hoarding findings out of fear that someone else will publish first, willingly exchanged documents and traded paper drafts. I had helped to create such a community by gathering together researchers through a call for papers and outreach to existing networks. With Dorothea Hoehtker of the ILO, who was working on the institution's Centennial History at that time, and Susan Zimmermann of Central European university, who was focused on the inter-war period, we held a series of workshops in Geneva, Vienna, and elsewhere that advanced collaboration. The resulting edited collection, *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labor Standards, and Gender Equity* (2018), offers a basis for cross-national analysis.

<sup>26</sup> K.N. Blain, T.M. Gill (eds), *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign 2019.

From this experience, I recommend that we need to research different histories differently – not as lone investigators but as transnational teams. We should not only share archives, but generate grants collectively, divide up analysis, and synthesize together, taking advantage of tools developed by digital humanities and the new world of remote work. Through joining forces, we can run a floating and ongoing seminar, expanding knowledge of other histories and the conceptual tools necessary to undermine “master” narratives through gendering epistemological means as well as the ends. For few of us have the background to approach all the necessary parts of a transnational topic in as depth as might be necessary. A single scholar could have a good sense of global labor or women’s movements but still without a deep understanding of how, in a specific place and time, organizing women differed from organizing men, for example, or how unions fit into the larger politics of a given nation. While misinterpretation is possible, bringing multiple knowledges together through dialogue and sharing generates new perspectives and can advance theoretical concepts.

Such transnational partnerships are not merely anticipating. They already exist, though more in the social sciences, like the 6 countries Trans-Atlantic platform investigation on *Who Cares? Rebuilding Care in a Post-Pandemic World* for which I bring historical perspective to the US team. The WORCK (Worlds of Related Coercions in Work) suggests a model of transnational collaboration through jointly edited publications, training workshops, and conferences.

**F. de Haan:** It is probably the case that the task of creating a master narrative while writing from a global perspective can be unnerving for the reasons you suggest. And perhaps we can even add one more reason, namely the challenge to write such a narrative that is not Western-centric. Nonetheless, recent years have witnessed what we might call a small wave of monographs that provide global master narratives in the field of WGH, and especially the history of feminisms. Examples include books of Maria Bucur, Bonnie Smith, Lucy Delap, Mona Siegel, Dorothy Sue Cobble, and Elora Shehabuddin<sup>27</sup>. It is noticeable that “global” (or “world”) rather than

<sup>27</sup> M. Bucur, *The Century of Women: How Women Transformed the World since 1900*, Rowman & Littlefield, Washington, DC 2018; B. Smith, *Women in World History. 1450 to the Present*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019; L. Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2020; M. Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms. The Global Battle for Women’s Rights After the First World War*, Columbia University Press, New York 2020; D. Sue Cobble, *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey

“transnational” is the key term in these titles, so no lack of courage here. Perhaps the more or less simultaneous publication of all these books indicates that the field of WGH or of TGH has reached a new stage, in which collectively we have created so much scholarship that it is now possible to set up such projects. Also, it is likely that Shehabuddin’s *Sisters in the Mirror* is the least Western-centric of these, for the reasons already mentioned.

As to the question what we need to include in our toolboxes to be able to write such studies: all these books have appeared in English, with major US presses, and their authors are established scholars with access to research and travel money. Another requirement is reliable access to the Internet, and this on a regular basis (which is not the case for many scholars in the Global South, let alone for those in areas affected by wars or other violent conflicts), as well as access to large-scale, often expensive databases, which only Western university libraries can afford. Without such a material infrastructure, I don’t think these major undertakings are possible. The IFRHW has from the beginning aimed at supporting feminist historians around the world in doing international/transnational research, but it has not been possible to set up such a structure beyond offering occasional resources for travel and conference participation. Global inequalities continue to shape not just our world but also our academic work, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the field of Transnational History.

**L.J. Rupp:** There is nothing simple about engaging in transnational gender research, both because it demands mastery of context beyond the local or national and because it requires command of multiple languages and potentially access to archives disseminated across the globe. The idea of writing truly transnational gender history is, indeed, unnerving. There are two strategies that help to overcome the challenges, both in terms of fully grasping the context and simplifying research strategies. One is to focus on transnational organizations, conferences, or policies. My work, as well as that of my colleagues Eileen Boris and Francisca de Haan, takes this approach. My *Worlds of Women* centered on three major transnational women’s organizations and the coalitions in which they played a part. Francisca’s pioneering work focuses on the Women’s International Democratic Federation, a large and vital organization that

extended far beyond the Euro-American world and that has been, until recently, overlooked because of the Cold War<sup>28</sup>. Eileen's groundbreaking work unearths the history of transnational policy-making on women's labor by exploring the ways that women workers themselves, including women from the Global South, had an impact on the policies produced by the International Labour Organization<sup>29</sup>. To cite just one other example, Mona Siegel uses the 1919 peace conference to analyse the transnational struggle for women's rights in the interwar period<sup>30</sup>. In all of these cases, the focus on a center – organizations or a policy or a conference – made it possible to take on a transnational story without having to master countless local contexts.

The other strategy is to focus on the involvement of a nation or region in transnational interactions. To mention just one example among many, Wendy Pojmann focuses on the involvement of two Italian women's organizations in transnational activism on both sides of the Cold War<sup>31</sup>. With this approach, a deep and thorough understanding of the individuals, groups, and context is possible; following the thread of national participation in transnational organizations, gatherings, and debates allows insight into the transnational scene. Ideally, we would have a wide variety of such histories of national involvement in transnational interactions, which, alongside studies from the transnational center, would allow a full picture of transnational gender activism.

I am focusing on approaches to transnational movements and policies not only because this is what I know best, but also because the concept of "transnational gender history" is so broad. One can imagine a transnational history of the way gender is understood and practiced across the globe, but that would be a monumental research project. This is where

<sup>28</sup> See, among others, F. de Haan, *Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organizations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)*, in «Women's History Review», 2010, vol. 19, n. 4, pp. 547-573; Ead., Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones: *Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics*, in «Journal of Women's History», 2013, vol. 25, n. 4, pp. 174-189. Also on the WIDF, see Y. Gradska, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South, and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World?"*, Routledge, New York 2021.

<sup>29</sup> E. Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919-2019*, Oxford University Press, New York 2019.

<sup>30</sup> M.L. Siegel, *Peace on our Terms: The Global Battle for Women's Rights After the First World War*, Columbia University Press, New York 2020.

<sup>31</sup> W. Pojmann, *Italian Women and International Cold War Politics, 1944-1968*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013.

synthetic histories, built on the work of numerous scholars with a deep understanding of local contexts, come in. That is the approach I took to my global history of same-sex sexuality, *Sapphistries*<sup>32</sup>. That was audacious enough, but a global study of gender across time and place would require more extensive primary research than exists at present in order to begin to synthesize the wide variety of ways that societies deem and practice gender. Perhaps ironically, we probably know more about transgender cross-culturally than we do about cisgender, not just from classic collections of articles but also, for example, from a new global history, Kit Heyam's *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*<sup>33</sup>.

All of which is to say, there are enormous challenges and equally enormous rewards awaiting scholars of transnational gender history. I look forward to the next generations of historians who will take on the task of writing a truly transnational history of gender writ large.

<sup>32</sup> L.J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*, New York University Press, New York 2009.

<sup>33</sup> K. Heyam's, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*, Seal Press, New York 2022.

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