

“Rethinking Women’s History, New Perspectives on the History of Women in the Early American Republic”

CRAN/CREW (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3) and LARCA (Université Paris-Diderot), June 17th, 2016

Auréliane Narvaez



Publisher
AFEA

Electronic version

URL: <http://transatlantica.revues.org/8297>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference

Auréliane Narvaez, « “Rethinking Women’s History, New Perspectives on the History of Women in the Early American Republic” », *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 02 October 2017, connection on 19 October 2017. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/8297>

This text was automatically generated on 19 October 2017.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

"Rethinking Women's History, New Perspectives on the History of Women in the Early American Republic"

CRAN/CREW (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3) and LARCA (Université Paris-Diderot), June 17th, 2016

Auréliane Narvaez

- 1 Since the 1970s, and the historiographical paradigm shift that brought to the fore previously neglected fields of scholarship intent on recovering the trajectories of ethnic, sexual, cultural, and social minorities, women's history has been dramatically refashioned. Fighting the consensual approach that envisioned American history as a grand narrative of linear progress tailored by men's thoughts, writings, desires, and actions, women's studies have enlarged the scope of our historical perspective and opened new methodological and interpretative vistas to critical theory thinkers and historians. "Normal is anti-feminist," American feminist historian Lori Ginzberg argued in her keynote address. This perplexing and highly stimulating contention captures the challenges of deciding to engage in women's history. Does writing about the margins mean writing marginal history? And how can women's history assert its subversive and dissenting nature while leaving the margins of American history in order to occupy the center of the historical stage? These questions remain of paramount importance to our present time, as the conference held on July 17th 2016 aptly demonstrated.
- 2 Entitled "**Rethinking Women's History, New Perspectives on the History of Women in the Early American Republic,**" the conference was organized by H el ene Quanquin (Universit e Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3) and Augustin Habran (Universit e Paris-Diderot) with the support of the research groups CRAN/CREW and LARCA. Devised as an opportunity for French and American scholars to reflect on their methodology, sources, and perception of women's and gender history, this one-day conference allowed

historians to engage in a conversation on the necessity or mere possibility of rethinking women's history and crafting new approaches to this scholarly field. As H el ene Quanquin highlighted in her opening remark, the early American republic is a particularly engaging and fertile ground for women's historians insofar as the period was the stage of interlocking changes in women's perception of themselves as the concepts of race, gender, womanhood, intimacy, and sexuality underwent tangible, sometimes radical transformations.

Rethinking power

- 3 The first panel "**Women's Empowerment: Families, Communities, Networks,**" chaired by Nathalie Caron (Universit e Paris-Sorbonne), explored the ambivalent strategies of empowerment implemented by women in the early American republic and the porous relationship between seemingly antagonistic notions such as freedom and dependence, power and subordination, individuality and community.
- 4 In her paper entitled "**From Dependence to Independence: Women and the Negotiation of Power in the Early American Republic,**" Jacqueline Beatty (George Mason University) examined how women in this era took advantage of their social, economic and legal dependence to gain certain degrees of independence from their husbands. Building on the apparent paradox of using the language of subordination as a means to obtain freedom, Beatty argued that women's gendered discourse on female inferiority could be used to their own advantage when they filed petitions for divorce. By capitalizing on their husbands' abuses or deficiencies, women were able to take advantage of the legal framework and conventional rules of feminine behavior in order to release themselves from the very constraints of marital dependence. This aspect of women's empowerment complicates the traditional interpretation of women's emancipation as a departure from the linguistic, legal and social norms of female subordination. Indeed, the divorce petitions revealed that it was from their very position of dependence that women could undermine the system that kept them under submission, gain agency, and declare their right to certain protections.
- 5 Turning to a less agonistic view of conjugality, the second paper traced the biographical trajectory of a French immigrant couple, Charlotte and Waldemard Mentelle, and showed how their difficult adaptation to the early American republic compelled them to refashion the terms of their matrimonial engagement and renegotiate the traditional power relations between husband and wife. In his presentation entitled "**A Parisienne in Antebellum Kentucky: The Transatlantic Life of Charlotte Mentelle 1770-1860,**" Marcel Delperne (Universit e de La Rochelle) underscored how the couple challenged the theory of separate spheres and subverted the traditional dichotomy between private and public realms, which associates men with the outside world and women with domesticity. Indeed, while Waldemard was in charge of the household and children, Charlotte engaged in a teaching career and was deeply invested in the social and cultural life of Lexington, Kentucky, where she opened her own boarding school for young ladies in 1820. Though disappointed by the hardships of Frontier life and Kentuckians' lack of manners, Charlotte succeeded in carving out a distinct space for herself in the early American republic's turbulent environment, especially through her ability to maintain and establish intellectual, professional, and business networks.

Rethinking womanhood

- 6 The conference tackled a more intimate dimension of women's perception of themselves in the second panel chaired by Myriam Boussahba-Bravard (Université Paris-Diderot) and entitled "**Reconsidering Cultural Ideals of Femininity.**" The two presentations that followed considered the different ways in which women attempted to unsettle the traditional paradigm of "true womanhood" and explored how women negotiated with, and reframed, the sexual, physiological, and scientific imperatives ascribed to their gender.
- 7 Considering women as desiring subjects, Carol Faulkner (Syracuse University) challenged the historiographical paradigm of true womanhood and offered a historical investigation into a competing ideal to women's alleged passionlessness. In her paper "**Love vs. Virtue: Reconsidering the Ideal of Female Sexual Purity,**" Faulkner examined another impetus that shaped women's desires—"true love"—and proposed a reappraisal of the sexual experiences of white, middle-class women by showing how some of them tried to reframe the marriage institution along more sensitive and emotional lines. Mary and Sherman Booth exemplified the trajectory followed by a variety of American reformers in the 1840s and 1850s, and the difficulty of negotiating the defiance of social customs with the legal dependence imposed on married women. As the couple settled into conventional domesticity, the ideal of "true love" gradually disintegrated. Sherman's repeated marital betrayals and Mary's dissatisfaction with her husband's lack of sexual self-control eventually exposed their incompatible individual desires and divergent perceptions of "true love." Mary eventually rebelled against social conventions to explore alternatives to the heterosexual, monogamous ideal of "true love" as she opened herself up to sensual pleasure and same-sex relationships in the 1860s.
- 8 The panel's second presentation investigated the dialectics of womanhood and knowledge by reconsidering women's history through the lens of science or, rather, what counted as science in the early republic. In her paper "**Finding Women in the History of Science: Female Physiognomists in Early America,**" Rachel Walker (University of Maryland) explored women's access to scientific knowledge but also their practice of science and conception of human nature during the period through the study of physiognomy. After reminding the audience of the prominent status of this popular discipline (now largely discarded by the scientific community) in the early republic, Walker argued that women's appropriation of physiognomic analysis and rhetoric and the way they adapted scientific knowledge to their own purposes allowed them to engage in larger debates concerning female beauty, intellect, and place within society. Thus, physiognomy was used by women to positively reevaluate their cognitive capacities, undermine allegations of intellectual inferiority, and defend their right to serve as legitimate scientific practitioners.

Mainstreams and cutting edges

- 9 In a thought-provoking and highly stimulating keynote lecture entitled "**Mainstreams and Cutting Edges: Women's History and the Grand American Narrative,**" historian Lori Ginzberg (Pennsylvania State University) addressed the political and radical implications inherent to women's studies, and reflected upon the possibility of imagining a new grand narrative that would be utterly inextricable from the feminist, antiracist,

and critical theory movement. In considering the relationships between historical mainstreams and cutting edges, Ginzberg first acknowledged the relative dullness which currently plagues political, radical, and feminist edges and invited the audience to ponder over the problem of incorporating women's histories into a mainstream that has remained remarkably unchanged by the challenges posed by the feminist critique. Underscoring the difficulty of navigating the tension between dissenting on the margins and transforming the mainstream, Ginzberg also recognized that despite their efforts since the 1970s to challenge mainstream narratives and radically reshape political, social and national histories, women's and gender historians have failed to bring the margins into the limelight of historical center stage. As American high-school textbooks reveal, feminist historians have seemingly been doing their work in a well-fenced backyard. Indeed, women's history continues to occupy little boxes in the corners of the textbooks' pages, amidst, but separate from, the bulk of the text where white men's conversations figure prominently. Ginzberg did not interpret this incapacity to bring the margins into the center as a result of intellectual laziness. On the contrary, this seems to be the result of a deliberate effort to maintain the presumption that what white men think, say, and do matters more than other people's lives and stories.

- 10 One of the main obstacles to reworking that narrative has to do with the perception of democracy in the United States and the seductive idea that the American political system required only minor adjustments to embrace new groups. Noting that all historical narratives are intrinsically linked to nation-building, Ginzberg argued that consensus history has flattened, obscured, and dismissed margins and other voices that did not fit in the linear, teleological narrative of American progress. The greatest challenge facing feminist scholars therefore consists in stepping outside their comfort zone and claiming the right to reorder the world along new radical, sometimes uneasy perspectives. Ginzberg's most provocative claim probably lay in her critique of the term "gender," which, she argued, downplays the political nature of women's studies and fails to seize how overlapping systems of dominance shape our society. The incorporation of women's history into gender studies is also problematic in the sense that, by including but not naming women, gender moderates the claims voiced by feminist critique, makes it more palatable and by implication less political. After two decades trying to untangle ideas that were deemed unthinkable within the mainstream historical narrative of the United States, Ginzberg eventually raised the audience's awareness on the pressing necessity to displace women's studies from the story of white, married middle-class women, whose liberal demands for inclusion were always the first to be met, but also resharpen cutting edges in order to remodel the grand narrative of American history.
- 11 Lori Ginzberg's keynote provided ample grounds for thought on the future of research and led to an inspiring discussion in the Q&As, which fittingly paved the way to the conference's last panel.

Rethinking methodologies

- 12 The conference tackled the metahistorical dimension of women's history in the closing panel chaired by Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3) and entitled "**Writing and Recovering Women's History and Histories: Methods and Challenges.**" The two presentations that followed explored the methodological and

historiographical difficulties inherent to women's history, and identified some new avenues and perspectives that remain to be explored by scholars of the discipline.

- 13 In her paper "**Gender and Passing in the Early American Republic**," Catherine Kerrison (Villanova University) reflected upon the theoretical and archival challenges of writing the historical biography of Thomas Jefferson's daughter Harriet Hemmings. Instead of considering women of color as comparative models or mere indicators of the general structure of American society with respect to racism and sexism, Kerrison aimed at studying Harriet Hemmings for herself, as an individual. Researching the trajectory of a woman of color who hid her black origins and intended to pass as white necessarily raised the difficulty of uncovering histories where anonymity was central. Hemmings's passing was neither a sign of embracing a liberal ideology of empowerment, nor a rejection of her black relatives, but represented the only strategy for freedom in a time when slavery was legally protected nationwide. By deviating the course of her family history and passing as a freeborn white woman, Hemmings not only silently challenged racial binaries and hierarchies, but she also escaped sexual oppression and radically reinvented herself at the cost of losing her family and community.
- 14 Based on a state-of-the-field article to be published in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the last presentation entitled "**Gender and Recent Developments in Early Republic Historiography**" discussed the possibility of radically reversing the scholarly perspective on the period by placing women and gender at the center of the historical narrative. In her paper, Sarah Pearsall (Cambridge University) argued that the recent expansion of both language and geography in the field of early American history allowed scholars to encompass new territories of knowledge worthy of historical examination and enabled them to reevaluate the margins as focal subjects of analysis. Works on Native American populations, ethnogenesis, Frontier life or borderlands have made tentative, but often limited attempts to put women first and analyze their varied forms of agency as more than a mere negotiation of power with men. The traditional historiographical approach to the Revolution and early republic is largely indebted to a racial and sexual politics, which Pearsall deemed largely outdated and inadequate for our present time. Despite promising works by Elizabeth Fenn, Kathleen DuVall or Ann McGrath, reappraising the history of the period from women's perspective largely remains to be written. However challenging the enterprise might be, Pearsall contended that reshaping standard historical narratives through the lens of women's history was essential to the understanding of the early American republic.

AUTHOR

AURÉLIANE NARVAEZ

Université Paris 4