

# “Continuities and Changes”: Fourteenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women

*Franca Iacovetta*  
University of Toronto

*Krista Cooke*  
Canadian Museum of Civilization

*Lisa Helps*  
University of Toronto

*Rhonda Hinthner*  
Canadian Museum of Civilization

As many women’s historians well know, collaborative projects that bring together a diversity of voices and research expertise have deeply enriched feminist scholarship and helped to democratize intellectual work in the academy. So what better way to report on “Continuities and Changes: Fourteenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women”—a three-day, 204-session feminist history conference that left many folks feeling enlightened, exhilarated, and exhausted—than to do so collaboratively? Furthermore, the impressive mix of scholars, activists, and projects that characterized this (as other) Berks program deserved more than one individual’s response, and, together, we could give fuller coverage of the conference. We are all Canadian but represent a mix of regular Berks goers and first-time participants; museum- and university-based historians; and research interests spanning women’s labor, ethnic radicalism, homelessness, sexuality, and bodies.

Although quite large (approximately 1,400 people attended this year) the Berks has a very different “feel” than other meetings of comparable size. It has the kind of warm and friendly atmosphere that enables strangers to smile at each other and continue debates—that began in sessions—over coffee, drinks, or meals. First-time participants also commented on the diverse range of scholars from around the globe and the stimulating mix of research papers, politics, networking, and social activities.

The 2008 meeting, held at the University of Minnesota from June 12–15, was a celebration of the Berkshire Conference’s thirty-fifth year, and, in line with the program’s anniversary theme of “Continuity and Change,” there were a variety of panels that encouraged reflection on older and continuing influences and changing paradigms within the field on influential historians (such as Mary Hartman and Linda Gordon) and continuing professional

challenges. The program also reflected a continuing interest in comparative, global, and transnational women's history while the sessions on women and public history attracted sizeable audiences.

The opening plenary session on Thursday evening—"The Changing(?) Status of Women in the Historical Profession: Progress and Challenges,"—charted the ups and downs of women's presence relative to men in PhD history programs, university jobs, and other professional posts and addressed the particular challenges of women of color in the academy. It served as a sober reminder of a critical labor lesson: hard-fought-for gains should never be taken for granted because, without constant vigilance, they can all too easily be diluted or lost. The session might have also addressed the situation of the many women historians who are employed in non-academic contexts. A discussion of the situation for non-university historians could have also shed light on the different scenarios involved; for example, do university-based historians enjoy greater academic freedom and autonomy than those working in museums? What is the status of women in the public history venue? Are they active professional researchers and curators, or do they fear becoming stuck in an emerging "pink-collar ghetto"?

The Friday morning keynote address, "Forty Years of Women's History in International Perspective: Continuing the Conversation," was a plenary with several scholars addressing the conference's main theme by speaking on the state of the field within their respective national context. The emphasis was on sites outside North America. In a compelling multimedia presentation, "In Mutual Gaze," Ping-Chen Hsiung, Academia Sinica, noted that Chinese women's history is both thankful for and burdened by modern, western feminist theories and pointed to the need for more reciprocity between western and eastern women's histories. Western feminist theory has been important in terms of casting a new lens on key problems in Chinese women's history, such as the "widow complex" and the female body. Yet at the same time, Hsiung lamented, "feminist theories always have to don a western gown," that is, they are generated from the experiences of *western* women. Yet she was also hopeful that increased reciprocity was possible. "We remake ourselves in the remaking of others," she said. Part of this remaking, Hsiung suggested, might come in the form of co-teaching courses across ethnic and cultural divides or of thinking about a women's/feminist *world* history. In an engaging presentation that wove together the personal, political and intellectual, Bharati Roy, University of Calcutta, made the point that, because in India there is a strong historical link between the anticolonial movement and the women's movement, feminist research and feminist action are inseparable. From the very beginning, she suggested, women's struggles in India have always been part of a wider revolution.

We wished there had been time for more explicitly comparative conversations that addressed continuing and changing debates, challenges, and research agendas. It would also have been useful to have looked beyond the university to public history venues, especially given that the program had many panels

dealing with public history/material history. These included “Unmentionables: Menstruation, Contraception, and Material Culture in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century North America,” in which Kristin Burnett critically assessed a rich source material—anthropological field notes, now housed at the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary, compiled by female students during the 1930s while they worked among the Blackfoot in Alberta—that was largely ignored because of its attention to female matters that male-dominated anthropology considered lacking in seriousness.

At large conferences like this one, attending film screenings is an excellent way of getting a “time out” while remaining engaged with the subject matter at hand. One excellent film screened at the Berks was *Passion and Power: The Technology of Orgasm* (Wendy Slick and Emiko Omori, 2007; 74 minutes), a history of the vibrator from early twentieth-century medical device (for treating hysteria and other women’s “conditions”) to taboo sexual device (illegal to sell in many of the United States). It was candid, funny, and enlightening—and gave the museum-based historians among us excellent leads for locating objects for a forthcoming project. Also excellent was Sam Feder and Julie Hollar’s *Boy I Am*, a full-length documentary that portrays female-to-male (FTM) transgender experiences and sets these experiences both within and alongside lesbian and feminist communities. The viewer is invited on a journey of exploration, pain, and possibility with the film’s subjects and is asked to bear witness before, during, and after surgery. As you follow the camera inside the operating room and witness the newly configured bodies that emerge afterward, you cannot help but be transformed in some ways as well.

A key feature of the “Big Berks” has always been its willingness to challenge, expand, reshape, and transcend borders and boundaries of every kind. This has had political and scholarly ramifications that have been critical to the continuing richness and evolution of labor history. Feminist labor historians have challenged static or rigidly defined categories of analysis or narrow definitions of the field and its “legitimate” subjects. Historians of working-class women challenged the traditional male focus of labor history and enlarged the scope beyond the workplace to include household and reproductive labor as well as sexuality, leisure, and domestic violence, while gendered and raced studies have more fully decentered “the white worker” (both male and female) and scrutinized subjects, such as workers’ religiosity, sex trade workers, and the labor of waging war, that had not received careful attention in earlier labor histories.

The 2008 Berks included dozens of broadly defined sessions in labor history, including Female Labor History during Slavery and Freedom in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Brazil; Identity Formation in Revolutionary Mexico (highlighting grassroots activism); Labor and Citizenship Training in US Indian Schools, Asylums, and Reformatories; Women’s Work in Preindustrial Europe and America; British Women and Home Defense during the Second World War; Sexuality and Culture in Cold War Europe and America; and Socialist-Feminist History. One excellent session, “The Gendered Side of the

New Free Market: Working Women at the American Century's End," tackled the hugely detrimental effects that 1970s deindustrialization, the privatization of home health care work, and Reaganomics have had on women workers. In a *tour de force* commentary, Nancy MacLean, Northwestern University, laid out the alarming dimensions of the problem highlighting some of the ways in which rightwing Christian fundamentalism has provided an ideological justification for attacks on unions, workplace rights, and working women. She urged scholars to study this most critical time in America's history.

Another labor highlight was the "Eva Valesh on Working Women in the Mill" city tour. A terrific example of what women's public history has to offer, the actor portraying Valesh, a reporter who exposed the harsh working conditions of late nineteenth century mill workers in Minneapolis, did an excellent job of describing key labor sites and how they related to the experiences of women and girls. A large photo album used to show maps and photos of individual buildings was particularly helpful at sites where buildings had been replaced by parking lots or condos. The use of the original texts of Valesh's articles for the Saint Paul *Globe* dramatically conveyed her voice and those of her informants, the dangerous and difficult conditions under which workers toiled, her sense of indignation, and the methods she used to gain surreptitious entry to factories and other workplaces.

One of the best-attended panels was not on the original program and addressed the timely topic of "Clinton vs Obama." Panelists and audience discussed "the masculine mystique" of Hillary Clinton's tough-as-a-man campaign style; how the Democratic Party primary contest offered an opportunity to teach students about class, gender, and racial politics in America; and Obama's potential for promoting or effecting real social change. The session provoked plenty of continuing discussion, though some thought it unfortunate that a "last-minute" plenary drew many participants away from previously scheduled panels.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the labor, both local and international, that went into organizing this major international conference. On the material side, the food was good with plenty of vegetarian options. The introduction of workshops and seminars where participants discussed papers that were read ahead of time was an excellent innovation facilitating more focused discussion, even allowing for some "technological difficulties." A few conference goers wished there had been more of a central meeting place, though the warm weather meant plenty of outdoor clustering took place. As we said at the outset, most of us left feeling both exhilarated and exhausted.