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Editorial Note: Individual Lives: Windows on Women's History

Jean Quataert, Leigh Ann Wheeler

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Individual Lives: Windows on Women's History

The *Journal of Women's History* regularly receives submissions of biographical accounts; often we reject these outright. Why? After all, the reading public loves biographies—a lot more than it loves historical monographs, if sales are any indication. Moreover, a women's history journal seems an especially likely venue for the publication of biographies. Not only have such works helped build the field, often by introducing influential new conceptual categories and interpretations such as women's political culture or transnational networks, but biographies are also uniquely suited to furthering the classic feminist task of making the personal political. As explained by the historian Susan Ware—featured in our last issue—feminist biography can do this by showing “how personal lives intersect with public accomplishments” and how private experiences “factor into events beyond the household.”¹ From our editorial perspective, biographical work that treats individual life stories as if they were historically significant all by themselves—work that stares at its subject rather than “see[ing] through” it, to use the historian Alice Kessler-Harris's apt phrase—does not sufficiently advance the scholarly goals of the *Journal*. While each article featured in this issue centers on the life of an individual woman, each treats the life experience, again in Kessler-Harris's words, “not as a subject to be studied for its own sake,” but as a window on “larger cultural and social and even political processes.”² Thus, each article in this issue investigates individual women's lives in ways that illuminate a wide range of issues central to the most innovative scholarship in the field, including agency and voice, methodology and self-representation, political challenges and identity, transnationalism and power, as well as separatism and accommodation in politics. They bring life stories, historical contexts, and research methods into revealing new relationships.

We begin with Sonja Boon's methodologically innovative article, “Recuperative Autobiography and the Politics of Life Writing: Lineage, Inheritance, and Legacy in the Writings of the Marquise de La Ferté-Imbault.” In her creative reading, Boon uncovers how the marquise employed a “politics of recuperative biography” to develop a matrilineal legacy and reroute her kinship line away from blood ties and toward constructed “bonds of intimacy, affection, and moral justice.” As a wealthy widow without siblings or heirs, the marquise experienced greater opportunities to exercise agency than most women in eighteenth-century France. One of her strategies was

to adopt various promising young women as her protégées, with hopes of passing down through them her values or "moral legacy" and her own story. Boon uses the autobiographical letter or, in her words, "epistolary testament," written by the marquise to one of her protégées, to understand her subject's legal strategy. She shows how a document that seems, on its face, unexceptional, actually presents the marquise's reconstruction of her own lineage. In other words, as Boon explains, "the marquise writes not only herself, but also her chosen 'family,' into being," directing "the master's tools" of law and inheritance toward the purpose of destroying and reconstructing her "family landscape." Of course, the "master's tools" alone would not have been sufficient to produce the legacy that the marquise desired. Her achievements in this regard can be credited to the relationships she developed with and the loyalty she inspired in other women as well as to the patriarchal legal system's flexibility. The marquise remained within the law's limits to privilege one part of her family over the other. Nevertheless, Boon's pioneering interpretation reveals the necessity of combining private records like correspondence with public documents like wills to understand the range of possibilities for women's agency and also to appreciate the clever ways that individual women could negotiate new realities within patriarchal institutions.

Lindsay A. H. Parker reorients us toward war and politics in "Family and Feminism in the French Revolution: The Case of Rosalie Ducrollay Jullien." Like Boon, Parker relies heavily on one woman's private letters to examine larger historical developments, in her case, the "challenges and changes that middle-class women experienced" during and as a result of the French Revolution. Parker begins by sketching the contours of Jullien's life in the years before 1789, so that she can show what changed as a result of the revolution. Like her contemporary, the marquise studied by Boon, Jullien used writing to "understand her surroundings and to define her position in them," but she also developed a "political consciousness and Revolutionary identity" through writing letters to friends, family, and editors of a published journal. Through these documents we learn how the French Revolution changed Jullien's life. She worked to protect her son from violence, functioned as her family's counselor and journalist, and became increasingly committed to women as a group, equality as an ideal, and to the newborn Republic. Like other republican revolutions, the French Revolution attached new political meanings to family relationships and women's roles. But Parker also discovers that the revolution imported republican ideas into families where it realigned allegiances—placing allegiance to the republic ahead of loyalty to family—and simultaneously invested family roles with political importance. Parker uses Jullien's life and writings to show that some women were satisfied with a political identity rooted in the

family and also to demonstrate ways that the French Revolution operated “at the most intimate level, the level of identity.”

Women’s writing continues to feature prominently in Binbin Yang’s “A Disease of Passion: The ‘Self-Iconizing’ Project of an Eighteenth-Century Chinese Woman Poet, Jin Yi (1769–1794)” which investigates the life of a woman who was glorified as a cultural ideal and simultaneously marginalized. Like the marquise in eighteenth-century France, Jin Yi participated in the very deliberate work of “self-construction” through her writing of poetry, specifically. Yang laments that Jin Yi’s voice seems submerged in the poetic style she adopted—the “male erotic poetic tradition of the *boudoir*”—and in the objectified meaning that others made of her life and work. Yang attempts, accordingly, to resurrect Jin Yi’s voice by showing how she wrote her own “fatal disease into a myth about romantic passion.” Young and in poor health, Jin Yi assured her own legacy by establishing literary networks, arranging to have her manuscripts preserved, and soliciting an epitaph from a prominent male poet and scholar. Yang interprets Jin Yi’s poems in the context of these many efforts at self-promotion, reading them against each other and alongside a popular contemporary novel to show how she created an iconic image of herself that resembled the novel’s romantic heroine. Through references to her own physical frailty and longings for love and life, Jin Yi was able to appropriate an erotic writing style normally considered unseemly for a woman of her elite status. Yang argues that Jin Yi’s poetry should not be read as evidence that she internalized a discourse associated with men or lower-status women. Rather, she bent “the horrid reality of a fatal disease” to a “glorifying end” by using it to create an iconic image of herself as “the cultural ideal of the century.” Through a new reading of Jin Yi’s life and work, Yang finds agency in documents that at first glance seem to suggest women’s objectification.

We move next to Tomomi Kinukawa’s “Science and Whiteness as Property in the Dutch Atlantic World: Maria Sibylla Merian’s *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705).” Using the critical race theorist Cheryl I. Harris’s concept of “whiteness as property,” Kinukawa explores the ways that Maria Sibylla Merian, a celebrated European entrepreneur-naturalist, “participated in the capitalist exploitation of colonial natural resources,” which, in Kinukawa’s interpretation, ultimately advanced a racial imperial project. Kinukawa offers a pointed challenge to more celebratory treatments that show how Merian’s gender identity informed her critique of European imperialism in Surinam. Kinukawa emphasizes instead the ways that Merian and other naturalists functioned as agents of colonization, working largely through the domestic sphere. Here, they participated in what the historian Paige Raibmon has called “the practice of everyday colonialism,” by showcasing domestic uses of natural resources from Surinam, from

“cultivating exotic fruits” to “decorating with rare natural objects.”³ Maintaining that separate spheres ideology has blinded historians to women’s domestic contributions to imperialism, Kinukawa scrutinizes the domestic sphere as “a transnational institution of science” and a major player in European imperialism. Kinukawa discovers in the empirical studies that Merian conducted at home, new tools of colonialism that revolved around the production of scientific knowledge. Through these tools and her own writing, Merian participated in the “systematic exploitation”—including what today is called “biopiracy”—that reinforced the ideology of “whiteness as property,” as it erased local knowledge and its uses. In Kinukawa’s hands, Merian’s work becomes a window into new intersections of gender, privilege, and race, through the role that white women’s domestic and self-actualizing occupations played in advancing colonial projects.

Isabelle Richet’s “Marion Cave Rosselli and the Transnational Women’s Antifascist Networks” introduces us to a woman whose transnational work served the purposes of antifascism. Noting the dearth of scholarship on women’s involvement in such activities, Richet shows how attention to women’s antifascist politics reveals important aspects of the resistance movement that have not been recognized. Most significantly, Richet suggests that antifascist women—who had established robust transnational networks partly because other organizations did not accept them as equals—responded more quickly than men to the emergence of Italy’s fascist dictatorship. As a British student in Italy in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Marion Cave became involved in antifascism through membership in *Circolo di Cultura*, a debating club that soon became an antifascist organization. There she met Carlo Rosselli, an Italian antifascist activist whom she later married. In the meantime, she joined a clandestine and more militant antifascist group, watched Benito Mussolini ascend to power, and escalated her activities on behalf of exiled and imprisoned antifascist Italians, which soon included her husband. Rosselli served as an intermediary between imprisoned antifascists and their families; she also planned escapes and informed influential British contacts—especially suffragists—about the realities of Mussolini’s dictatorship. After helping three prisoners escape, including her husband, Rosselli herself was arrested. European feminist groups mobilized for her release and also, given that she lost her British citizenship upon marrying an Italian national, expanded the call for “equal treatment of men and women in international law.” Through the life of Marion Cave Rosselli, Richet shows how women established important international connections through “family, education, work” and “previous political campaigns,” including efforts to win the right to vote and to overturn citizenship laws that discriminated against women. Women’s international connections were, she concludes, crucial to the development of an “antifascist transnational consciousness.”

Issues of separatism versus accommodation figure prominently in Linda Van Ingen's article on women in United States electoral politics, "If We Can Nominate Her, She is a Cinch to Elect': Helen Gahagan Douglas and the Gendered Politics of Accommodation, 1940–1944." Whereas many scholars—including Boon, Parker, and Richet—emphasize the importance of same-sex networks and solidarity to women's political influence, Van Ingen demonstrates that for some women in certain contexts, accommodation and integration into the dominant male structures were the keys to electoral success. Indeed, through Douglas's political career, Van Ingen "introduces accommodation as a useful concept for women's political history." Douglas, a Hollywood screen star and political novice, emerged on the electoral scene in the late 1930s. She was chosen by male Democratic Party leaders who sought a female counter-weight to the ambitions of long-time organizer of Democratic women, Nettie Jones, and later to the Republican Party's own glamour-girl, Clare Boothe Luce. Van Ingen shows how Douglas played into the goals of male party leaders by offering an alternative to Luce and working to divide organized women within the party. She demonstrates that women benefited from the incumbency effect when retiring male political veterans endorsed their candidacy, but also that women enjoyed symbolic value as women and were sometimes chosen to challenge women from intra-party factions or from other parties. Male party leaders realized, in the 1940s, that "only an assertive woman could challenge another assertive woman." Nevertheless, for Douglas, "party approval came at the cost of reinforcing gendered norms of propriety." When Richard Nixon challenged her in 1950, the conservative climate, factionalized party, and opposition from many Democratic women, assured her defeat. Through the political life of Douglas, Van Ingen shows how individual women could enter electoral politics by playing to powerful men; in other words, organized women's networks did not provide the only path to political power.

The book review essays featured in this issue address a number of related themes. In "Reading Race through U.S. Women's Biographies," Alison M. Parker discusses recent biographies of women in the nineteenth-century U.S.—four about black women who fought for civil rights and one about a white slaveholder. Together, these books highlight the importance of race and sex in shaping life experiences and opportunities, illustrating through individual lives dynamics that others would call "whiteness as property." Melissa Feinberg's creative review, "Sexuality, Morality, and Single Women in Fin-de-Siècle Central Europe," considers four books that examine how women tried to balance—or choose among—competing visions of femininity, especially as they related to marriage and sexuality. The authors show how debates over sexuality reflected but also influenced end-of-century concerns about equality and freedom in a modern society, leading Feinberg

to wonder whether "the existence of the debate itself...is central to the modern condition." Rochona Majumdar's provocative essay, "Love and Marriage in the Public Sphere" reviews histories that cover the topic from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries in England, Africa, Mexican-California, and the United States. Each volume emphasizes the contested nature of marriage and romantic relationships in particular national and geographic contexts. Majumdar's appreciative review nevertheless urges scholars to step out of a western focus on "the liberal repertoire of rights and self-interest" by engaging work on the "non-West" that considers "non-liberal notions of sacrifice and duty." Liette Gidlow's "The Deeper Meaning of Tupperware: Consumer Culture and the American Home," examines three books that trace American uses of consumer culture from the close of the Civil War to the onset of the cold war. In this pithy, elegantly written essay, Gidlow discusses how consumer culture distinguished national identities and boundaries even as it provided new opportunities and meanings for home and homemakers. These studies of consumer culture show, Gidlow concludes, that "the significance of home extends well beyond the doorstep, past national borders and into the world beyond"—a crucial point that is also borne out by the articles featured here.

This issue highlights the best of biographical approaches to women's history. All of the authors set their subjects in the context of major historical themes and transformations that include revolution, capitalism and imperialism, politics and resistance, and the work of self-representation. These historically-situated life histories develop new approaches and methods of analysis that center on a pioneering notion of "recuperative autobiography," cross-cultural translations of a "self-iconizing project," a critical assessment of the "gendered politics of accommodation," and deployment of transnational perspectives to investigate female activism in vastly different contexts. These broadly-conceived studies beautifully illustrate Ware's enthusiastic claim: "biography *can* make great history."⁴

Jean Quataert and Leigh Ann Wheeler

NOTES

¹Susan Ware, "Writing Women's Lives: One Historian's Perspective," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 413–435, 428.

²Alice Kessler-Harris, "AHR Roundtable: Why Biography?" *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 625–630, 626.

³Paige Raibmon, "The Practice of Everyday Colonialism: Indigenous Women at Work in the Hop Fields and Tourist Industry of Puget Sound," *Labor* 3, no. 3, (Fall 2006): 23–56.

⁴Ware, "Writing Women's Lives," 413 [emphasis added].