

Silences in Women's History and Steps to Take

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Throughout world and American history, women have been present, but they have not been discussed in the historical memory as they should have been. In many cases, museums focus on the work that men have done for history, and they forget to incorporate the other half of the population that has made an impact on the world that we see today. With the use of Trouillot and other scholars who focus on women's history, there can be a greater understanding of how women have been silenced in the historical record and what the best methods are to help more women's stories be known to the general public. Women have made lots of impacts on the world, and those should be remembered.

Trouillot explains how silences have occurred with historical memory and the historic sites in historical production. He uses four critical moments that display this. The first is the monument where the fact is created, which is the making of the source. The second is the fact assembly, which is the making of the archives. The third moment is when the fact is revealed and put into the narrative. Finally, the fourth moment is when that narrative becomes history.¹ This format gives an understanding of how silences have appeared. To expand this, Trouillot also puts emphasis on how the archives are ones that have the power to "help select the stories that matter."² This tells how the archives are one of the most important steps in the process of telling the history of a subject.

Women's history is one of the many silences that are in history, and many have been forgotten. For example, Page Miller explains that the Taos Pueblo women were the heads of the household during their time, and they helped keep their community going. They helped defend the community, and they were highly respected in their communities. They also built the houses

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 26.

² Ibid. Pg.52

that the whole family would live in. Today, the Pueblo women work at making baskets, textiles, and other artifacts to provide for their families, and many of the stories of their people and culture will not be brought to the bigger picture.³

Miller also continues in another chapter, discussing the women who worked and lived at the Boott Cotton Mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. It is a National Historic Park now, but when it started, it was created to attract young girls who worked on farms so that they could pay them a lower salary than they would have with men. It was hard work, and many women got married after a few years and left the mill.⁴ To add in another chapter, Miller discusses the Wesleyan Church in Seneca Falls, New York, which is also a National Historic Park that has the beginnings of the women's rights movement. This was the site where Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized a meeting to sign the Declaration of Sentiments, to help raise awareness for women's suffrage in the country.⁵ In one of the later chapters, Miller discusses Julia Morgan, who was one of the first women architects. Morgan soon had her own architecture company, and one of her first projects was rebuilding the Fairmont Hotel after the earthquake of 1906 in San Francisco destroyed it. One of her greatest projects, though, was the Asilomar Conference Center, which may have been the largest complex in the United States built in the Arts and Crafts style.⁶ Overall, Miller shows women who are not in the usual telling of American History, and some have been forgotten about due to a historical silence.

Edito Mayo is another author who discusses the silences in women's history. She argues, though her article, that just because women are not in the written historical narrative directly

³ Page Putnam Miller, *Landmarks of American Women's History* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2004), 14-22.

⁴ Ibid. Pg.48-57

⁵ Ibid, pg. 58-67

⁶ Ibid, pg.101

does not mean that they were not doing something for history. She explains that women's organizations are the reason that we have most of the President's houses that we do. She mentions that if it were not for Ann Pamela Cunningham forming the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, Mount Vernon may not be what it is today. Other women's organizations formed and did the same thing with Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and Andrew Jackson's Heritage.⁷

To continue this Fitzhugh Brundage explains in a chapter in *Monuments to the Lost Cause* that women's organizations such as the Daughters of the Confederacy created monuments on almost every southern town square in the South. He talks about a monument that was put up in 1891 in Pensacola, Florida, which was put up by the Ladies' Confederate Monument Association. He explains that the reason for this lies in the fact that in other countries, like the United Kingdom, the government pays to have monuments built in memory of each monarch. In the U.S. the government does not usually pay for monuments to be built. This is why these women grouped to celebrate something they thought was important to the future memory.⁸

In further reading of Mayo, she also explains the growth of women working in professional history and the rise of this in the 1970s and 80s, and with this, the rise in women's representation in history.⁹ Mayo, in her chapter in *Restoring Women's History Through Historic Preservation*, talks about exhibits in museums that only cover the male perspectives, "skew the historical reality of over half the population." To expand this chapter, Mayo discusses the Smithsonian and some of its exhibits that illustrate male-dominant topics where women are just there as sex objects. She says that this does not count as inclusion of women. Mayo also explains

⁷ Edith P. Mayo "Women's History and Public History: The Museum Connection." p.66

⁸ Fitzhugh W. Brundage "'Woman's Hand and Heart and Deathless Love': White Women and the Commemorative Impulse in the New South." In *Monuments to the Lost Cause*, ed. Cynthia Mills, Pamela H. Simpson (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003) 64-82.

⁹ Edith P. Mayo "Women's History and Public History: The Museum Connection." p. 68

that if history is done well, it can reshape how women are talked about in the present and future. In this, she calls for curators to show the historical realities of women to create a balanced story that validates women's experiences in history.¹⁰ Mayo also gives a guide as to what must happen for an exhibit to be considered a women's history exhibit:

(1) place women's point of view as the central frame of reference about experiences in the past; (2) define which group of women's experiences one is presenting in terms of race, class, or geographic locale; (3) emphasize female-defined historical experiences such as housework, childbirth, women-defined work/ labor/economic experiences, or women's impact on male-defined arenas and ask what further historical questions are raised by such an approach; and (4) recognize that questions about what is meaningful in the past are often quite different for women than for men.¹¹

To finish, Mayo adds that ultimately, for women's history to gain power, women themselves will have to advocate for more of their history to be seen.¹²

Another author who adds to this is Michelle McClellan, who starts with the fact that we have especially different historical sites for men's and women's history. Within this, she says that any one of these sites contains many different stories, narratives, and experiences. She adds that women can be found in many places, but especially she mentions that famous men have histories, talk about the wives of those men, and this will add to the history. To add to this, she mentions that historians have proven that women have basically been everywhere in the historical world. McClellan finishes this article with the notion that women's history is just as old as men's history, and what constitutes a family, gender, and sexuality are always changing with the future.¹³

¹⁰ Edith Mayo, "Putting Women in Their Place: Methods and Sources for Including Women's History in Museums and Historic Sites," essay, in *Restoring Women's History Through Historic Preservation*, 2003, 111–28 111-118

¹¹ Ibid. 119.

¹² Ibid. 128.

¹³ Michelle McClellan, "Did Martha Washington Sleep Here? Feminism, Power and Preservation," in *Bending the Future*, 2016, pp. 166-169.

The next author who talks about women's history silences is Patrica West, who starts her argument with the notion that people think that house museums are becoming more politically correct because they thought that they were politically neutral, but the fact that they have left out women, slaves, and other people who were present in the house this means that they were not neutral at all in the beginning. Then she uses this to tell the amount of people that would have interacted with the house during the time that the house was occupied by the original house owner. Put simply, there is more history in the house than just what happened to the main male figure in the house museum.¹⁴

West does, on the other hand, say that whenever women's history is displayed in the house museum's rooms, it is understated and does not include the amount of housework that was needed to run the house. The wives of the male figures are also not represented well in the house museum, and they are also shown to be charming and loving wives. This is also with the help of the omission of slaves, servants, and other workers from the scene, where this becomes true.¹⁵ To finish, West calls for historians to reconstruct the contents of house museums' sole focus on the male house owner and instead bring a broader approach in and incorporate all the people who helped with the house, especially the women.¹⁶

Mona Domoah, another author, who examines this topic, opens her article "Toward a Gendered Historical Geography of North America," with the idea that no matter where you are, you are in an area that has been shaped by many cultures and time periods. Domoah explains that in big towns such as New York in the late nineteenth century, the shopping district and the

¹⁴ Patricia West, "Uncovering and Interpreting Women's History at Historic House Museums," In *Restoring Women's History Through Historic Preservation* (Baltimore, MA: John's Hopkins University Press, 2003), 83–95, 83–84.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.85

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 95

home were viewed as feminine, and the business district was viewed as masculine. With this, the women soon became viewed as the consumers, and with the addition of this, department stores began their rise. With this, sidewalks were soon given gas lighting in favor of the women who may need them.¹⁷ In another section of her article, Domash explains how neighborhoods became gentrified in the late 1980s through the process of women getting jobs in the social services and education. This was combined with the rise of single women and single mothers living in certain inner-city neighborhoods. She also explains this with the correlation that women live close to where they work, and this is what caused the gentrification of neighborhoods.¹⁸

Gail Dubrow writes on this topic as well, and she was an editor on *Restoring Women's History Through Historic Preservation*. In Dubrow's article, though, she writes about ways to use public space to display women's history. To begin this article, she calls for new ways to interpret women's history with the help of public art, instead of plaques. She brings this up because there is a need to educate the public about women's history. She even uses the Women's Landmark Project as an example. It is led by Page Miller, and it has brought the recognition of the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Roxbury to light, which is the oldest remaining hospital that was for women in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. To extend this, she lists and describes other sites in the town of Boston that are worth interpretation and reinterpretation. This list includes the Anne Hutchinson residence, places associated with black women's history, dress reform parlors, women's rights headquarters, and homes for working women. She exemplifies her ideas on interpretation with the dress reform parlor section.

¹⁷ Mona, Domash "Toward a Gendered Historical Geography of North America," in Craig E. Colten, Geoffrey L. Buckley (eds.), *North American Odyssey, Historical Geographies for the Twenty-first Century*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014) pp. 291-308. 291-296

¹⁸ Ibid, 304-305

She says that Winter Street could exhibit public art and public historical interpretation in an adjacent corridor with statues displaying the harassment that dress reformers experienced. In this fashion, Dubrow uses the list of subjects to illustrate the suggestions on ways to interpret these areas.¹⁹

The last author who talks about ways to interpret the silences that are present in women's history is Heather Huyck. This book is called *Doing Women's History in Public: A Handbook for Interpretation at Museums and Historic Sites*. She writes this book to educate people who operate museums on how they need to interpret women's history.²⁰ In her introduction to the book, she says that while she worked for the National Park Service sites, they tried to find women's history at every site, but the only site they had the hardest time with was Alcatraz Island. What she is saying here is that there is women's history almost everywhere you just have to look for it.²¹ In the first chapter of this book, Huyck mentions that most of the time, women's history in the past has been seen as a small piece of the history of humans, but in reality, it is half the population of all races, classes, and sexualities. When we put this idea into action with American history, it changes history because when we think about the women, they played a bigger role in the economy and the politics of the day than was ever thought of before. Women did jobs and tasks that were essential to the way of life in America and the whole world. Huyck says that interpreting women's history in new ways helps us to realize what impact women have made on the world that we see today.²²

¹⁹ Gail Lee Dubrow, "Claiming Public Space for Women's History in Boston: A Proposal for Preservation, Public Art, and Public Historical Interpretation," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 1 (1992): 111–48.

²⁰ Heather Ann Huyck, *Doing Women's History in Public: A Handbook for Interpretation at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), xv-xvii.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* 3-14

Overall, understanding the silences in women's history helps us to learn what needs to be fixed in the way that public historians present history to the public. With knowledge of methods to fix this problem, there can be a change, and more history can be known to the public. Together, this can be what educates people as to what women have done in this world.

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