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HISTORICAL PRACTICES

WHY WOMEN ALSO KNOW HISTORY

Emily Prifogle and Karin Wulf

“**W**omen Also Know Stuff. Does that sound obvious? It’s not, alas.” In early 2016 a group of women political scientists announced in *The Washington Post* their reasons for forming a group called Women Also Know Stuff. The US presidential election dramatically exposed the ongoing imbalance in the consultation and citation of women experts in political discussion.¹ The new group was responding directly to media bias, but it has long been clear that bias—not only against women but against people of color, LGBTQ scholars, and other groups—is persistent in academia. The historical profession is no exception.

In the last two decades, women have earned 42 percent of all history PhDs and, according to recently collected data from the American Historical Association (AHA), women have achieved near parity in academic hiring.² Yet women are underrepresented in citation counts, publishing, hiring, promotion, peer review, grant awards, syllabi, and conference panels—nearly every measure of an academic historian’s professional life.³ While recognizing parity in hiring, the AHA simultaneously noted that gender plays an additional “role in the professional experiences of women” in the form of “compensation, tenure decisions, sexual harassment, parental leave policies, and more subtle forms of discrimination [that have] held back women historians for years.”⁴

Public perception and media representation of history and historians both reflect this professional underrepresentation. A Google image search for “historian” in July 2019 retrieved primarily images of white men whose sartorial preferences leaned heavily toward tweed. Journalists disproportionately rely on male experts and fail to seek out and quote women experts. Women’s expertise is routinely disregarded, even when they are the primary authors and researchers of the subject in question.⁵ This dismissal not only means that the public is not seeing or hearing enough from diverse historians, but neither are students or our colleagues.

These are serious and systemic issues that require a multi-pronged approach. One possibility is to take advantage of the online world, already abuzz with efforts to promote the work of underrepresented scholars and draw attention to underutilized expert knowledge. For example, hashtags have proven effective in creating collective syllabi like the #Charleston-Syllabus created by Keisha Blain, Chad Williams, and Kidada Williams in

response to the shooting in South Carolina during a Bible study meeting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015.⁶ Crowdsourced syllabi draw together more than a reading list for critical engagement on a particular subject; they also use a hashtag to create and mobilize inclusive communities.

Women Also Know History (WAKH) was born of this online world and founded specifically on the model of Women Also Know Stuff, the initiative created by women political scientists. Women Also Know History is a database where women can create professional profiles so the media and others can locate them for professional inquiries and comments. Women Also Know History is also a social media campaign. Many similar initiatives have followed in Women Also Know Stuff's wake, creating databases, websites, and social media presences in more than a dozen fields that promote the work of women and people of color. This includes the groups: People of Color Also Know Stuff, Women in Sociology Also Know Stuff, and Women+ Do Philosophy. Others, like the LGBT Scholar Network, amplify the work of LGBT scholars across all disciplines on Twitter.

We began Women Also Know History in 2017 with co-founder Keisha N. Blain. The goal of the project is to amplify and support women historians in response to the clear media and professional bias. Despite decades of work by women historians' associations, initiatives for inclusion are more necessary than ever, and social media provides a burgeoning platform for this work. We launched the Women Also Know History Twitter account, @womnknowhistory, in the summer of 2017 as an explicit challenge to the traditional look and sound of historical expertise. The hashtag #ILook-LikeAHistorian drew a huge response, with women historians sharing images of the incredible diversity of women historians and their work. The reaction on social media was immediate and overwhelming because it resonated with women in the profession who had long experienced the subtle and not-so-subtle biases present in our field.⁷ Our Twitter account began to gain thousands of followers through a second hashtag, #WomenAlsoKnowHistory. This was all a full year before we launched the website, womenalsoknowhistory.com. Now, our Twitter and Facebook accounts reach over 14,000 followers each day with posts promoting and celebrating women historians. We rely on the critical support of folks with extensive social media experience and following, especially Keisha, to help guide and promote the work we are doing.

Women Also Know History offers some concrete solutions to explicit and implicit gender bias in the historical profession and in public perceptions of historical expertise. The WAKH database on womenalsoknowhistory.com contains over 3,700 profiles of experts who identify as women and who have trained as, and are primarily occupied as, historians. The database, searched hundreds of times each week, provides a way to tackle underrepresentation

of women historians within professional and public settings. Historians can use the keyword-searchable database to find conference panelists and keynote speakers, peer reviewers, scholarship for syllabi, and new colleagues and connections. Journalists, podcasters, and organizations in search of public speakers can similarly find experts on nearly any topic anywhere in the United States (and increasingly in other parts of the world) through the database's search feature. Women in the historical profession collectively contribute to this database to eliminate excuses for the exclusion of women from panels, syllabi, and the media.⁸

In addition to the database, Women Also Know History seeks to use social media to change perceptions of historical expertise in the profession and among the public. The mobilization of Twitter hashtags, in particular, has been crucial to our efforts to achieve this goal. The hashtag #WomenAlsoKnowHistory resonated deeply within the history community inside and outside of academia. It is used both to celebrate achievements of women historians and to draw attention to incidents of gender inequity. A hashtag like #WomenAlsoKnowHistory is inherently inclusive, inviting others both to use it and to contribute to the conversation about gender discrimination and imbalance in the historical profession.

We also have a small but mighty swag department. The Women Also Know History stickers on laptops, water bottles, and notebooks are not just markers that the owner attended one of the many conferences where we sent stickers by request to the organizers but they are also physical signs of the community forming around #WomenAlsoKnowHistory. We have shared over ten thousand stickers with colleagues who ask for them to give to their students, colleagues, and even their partners, kids, and parents.

As we think about the ways that new digital spaces have opened for historians, we need to think about the different kinds of work we are doing with them. We all understand the power of digital tools for research, making archival collections and secondary materials more widely available and easily accessible, and we know that digital tools have inspired new methodologies and vice versa. Digital Humanities is a crucial field for exploring issues around gender, race, sexuality, and more. But digital spaces also allow us to engage wider audiences *and one another* in new ways. Organizations like the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, founded in 1930, and the American Historical Association's Coordinating Council for Women in History, founded in 1969, continue to perform crucial work for women's history and for women historians. By innovating meeting space and organizational capacity, these groups took advantage of different social and cultural moments to offer a platform for addressing professional inequities and needs. Women Also Know History offers a very different (but complementary) space, arriving at a very different moment.

Essential to getting Women Also Know History up and running has been the collaboration of the three co-founders; Maddison Rhoa, who manages the WAKH social media and website; and the good folks at the Omohundro Institute (OI), who help out with such things as sticker distribution and allow for Karin's research account to fund WAKH. We also made the decision this year to limit sticker distribution to fifty at time, although we will provide more at cost. These may seem small details, but money and time are real costs to any project. And the key to its success is that it is not really ours at all. Women Also Know History—the hashtags, the database, and future projects—all belong to the community that identified the need for these tools. Where we head next will depend on how the community responds. We are still seeing strong numbers for new profiles created and searches on the database.

In the coming years, we will focus on three particular challenges faced by women historians. First, we know bias is an intersectional problem that requires intersectional thinking and solutions. Second, and not unrelated, we are increasing our collaboration with other organizations and initiatives. Third, we are thinking hard about how to get into journalists' workflows, and we are not alone. Plenty of scholars in all fields are lamenting the narrowness of expertise that journalists routinely consult. But building these resources will not help if we cannot get more journalists to use them.

We hope to see you online joining us as we tackle these issues collectively, because #WomenAlsoKnowHistory.

NOTES

¹Emily Beaulieu et. al., "Here's a list of smart women political scientists. They know stuff, too," *Washington Post*, February 11, 2016.

²Between 2004 and 2013, the AHA found that about 42 percent of history PhD graduates were women. AHA data also suggests that both men and women history PhDs find tenure-track employment at roughly the same rate: 50 percent of the time. For the AHA data, see Emily Swafford and Dylan Ruediger, "Every Historian Counts: A New AHA Database Analyzes Career for PhDs," *Perspectives on History*, July 9, 2018; "Where Historians Work: An Interactive Database of History PhD Career Outcomes," American Historical Association, accessed August 5, 2018, https://www.historians.org/wherehistorianswork#_ftn1; "Gender Distribution of Degrees in History," Humanities Indicators Project, updated April 2016, <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=252>; and "Doctorate Recipients by Sex and Subfield of Study: 2013," National Science Foundation, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/sed/2013/data/tab16.pdf>.

³The Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC) keeps an updated online bibliography of gender bias in academe. "Gender Bias in Academe: An Annotated Bibliography of Important Recent Stud-

ies," HASTAC, January 26, 2015, <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/superadmin/2015/01/26/gender-bias-academe-annotated-bibliography-important-recent-studies>. There is also a public Google doc of studies of gender bias in the academy. "Annotated Bibliography of Recent Studies of Academic Gender Bias and Gender Discrimination," accessed August 5, 2019, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QRcQUI4RSizlu-HxDY2uZxYp4EmYslmvm9BMtcd-RUis/edit>. For more about gender bias in the academy generally, see Kristen Monroe et. al., "Gender Equality in Academia: Bad News from the Trenches, and Some Possible Solutions." *Perspectives on Politics* 6 no. 2 (June 2008): 215–233. On bias and imbalance in citations and publications, Jevin West et al., "Gender Composition of Scholarly Publications," access August 5, 2019, <http://www.eigenfactor.org/gender/#>. See also "Cite Black Women: A Critical Praxis," Cite Black Women Collective, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.citeblackwomen-collective.org/our-praxis.html>. On peer review, see, Jory Lerback and Brooks Hanson, "Journals Invite Too Few Women to Referee," *Nature* 541 (January 2017): 455–457. On grants, see, Lutz Bornmann et. al., "Gender Differences in Grant Peer Review: A meta-analysis," *Journal of Informetrics* 1 no. 3 (January 2007): 226–238.

⁴On the persistence of gender bias after gender parity is reached, see Jevin West et. al., "The Role of Gender in Scholarly Authorship," *PLoS ONE* 8 no. 7 (July 2013): e66212. On the experiences of that bias, see Monroe, et. al., "Gender Equality in Academia."

⁵Among many accounts, see Danielle McGuire, "Historians are a Great Resource: Journalists, Be Sure to Give them Credit," *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 25, 2018; Adrienne LaFrance, "I Analyzed a Year of My Reporting for Gender Bias (Again)," *The Atlantic*, February 17, 2016; and Ed Long, "I Spent Two Years Trying to Fix the Gender Imbalance in My Stories," *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2018.

⁶Chad Williams, Kadida Williams, and Keisha N. Blain, eds. *The Charleston Syllabus Readings on Race, Racism, and Racial Violence* (University of Georgia Press, 2016).

⁷The #ILookLikeAHistorian hashtag was a riff on Sarah Pritchard's #ILookLikeAProfessor hashtag. For the history behind the hashtag, see Adeline Koh, "Who Gets to Say #I Look Like a Professor," *Medium*, August 9, 2015.

⁸Indeed, the burden of addressing gender bias in the profession has fallen disproportionately on those who have been directly harmed by it. The lack of compensation and recognition for women academics—especially women academics of color—who perform greater shares of emotional labor and service work has long been documented. Like other such initiatives, Women Also Know History depends on the unpaid labor of its founders and advisory board and the generous support of the Omohundro Institute. That unpaid labor—even if a labor of commitment—diverts time from the other demands of our careers and resources. Among many important contributions to understanding this phenomenon: Arlie Hochschild, *Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, (1983, updated reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Marcia L. Bellas, "Emotional Labor in Academia: The Case of Professors," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 561 (1999): 96–110; and Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, "The Burden of Invisible Work in Academia: Social Inequalities and Time Use in Five University Departments," in "Diversity & Social Justice in Higher Education," special issue, *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 39 (2017): 228–245.

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