

The Importance of Feminist History in a Global Pandemic

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As we write this editorial, the COVID-19 pandemic is entering its third month. Our everyday lives have drastically changed, requiring us to come to grips with this new normal. In seeking to make sense of the tragedy and immense scale of this global health crisis, parallels have been drawn to other pandemics, particularly the 1919 Spanish flu, which in Australia killed an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 people.¹ As feminist historians, we are especially interested in the gendered dimensions of pandemics past and present, including how they have impacted women. There is relatively little research on the gendered effects of the 1919 Spanish flu. We do know, however, that nurses, like those on the frontline today, would have been at higher risk of infection. The responsibility to entertain children, at home due to school closures, also fell entirely on women. Moreover, war widows or those with husbands still overseas who became ill were still expected to carry out their caregiving roles.² Almost exactly a century later, the context in which COVID-19 is occurring is vastly different; but there are similarities. Opinion pieces proclaim that its flow-on effects have left women ‘anxious, overworked [and] insecure’ and that lockdowns are a ‘disaster for feminism’ as they have placed the burden on women to balance full-time employment with home-schooling and domestic chores.³ Household isolation has also led to a worldwide increase in domestic violence, prompting the United Nations to urge governments to ‘prevent and redress’ violence against women in their pandemic response

1 Frank Bongiorno, ‘How Australia’s Response to the Spanish Flu Sounds Warnings on Dealing with Coronavirus’, *Conversation*, 22 March 2020, theconversation.com/how-australias-response-to-the-spanish-flu-of-1919-sounds-warnings-on-dealing-with-coronavirus-134017.

2 Humphrey McQueen, ‘The “Spanish” Influenza Pandemic in Australia, 1912–19’, in *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901–1975*, ed. Jill Roe (Sydney: Cassell Australia, 1976), 139; Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013), 523–4.

3 Annabel Crabb, ‘Coronavirus has Left Australian Women Anxious, Overworked, Insecure—And Worse Off Than Men Again’, *ABC News*, 24 May 2020, www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-24/coronavirus-has-set-back-progress-for-women-workplace-equality/12268742; Helen Lewis, ‘The Coronavirus is a Disaster for Feminism’, *Atlantic*, 19 March 2020, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/.

plans.⁴ More broadly, it has warned that as a result of COVID-19 and its associated economic impact, ‘even the limited gains [towards gender equality] made in the past decades are at risk of being rolled back’.⁵

Women in academia have not been immune. The number of submissions made by women to academic journals in all disciplines in the past month has dropped considerably, while those from men have increased.⁶ Juggling academia and motherhood has always been difficult; for many now it is almost impossible to maintain a competitive research output and tend to children at home all week too. Just yesterday, the University of New South Wales announced the closure of one of its early childhood centres as a result of lost revenue due to a rapid decline in international students—a decision that will disproportionately affect the women who work at and attend the university.⁷ For academic historians more broadly, travel restrictions and the closure of key archives and research institutions will see valuable projects delayed or abandoned. For many, already in precarious positions before the pandemic began, the lack of government support for universities will have an untold impact on career progression. In the midst of these circumstances, feminist history becomes more important than ever as it helps us to understand the structural inequalities that have faced women and others in the past and their significance today. *Lilith* champions the work of feminist and gender historians, and the publication of this issue during the COVID-19 pandemic is testament to its commitment to the discipline.

The 12 contributions to this issue explore how women have experienced and responded to such inequalities over time, some even flourishing despite them. In them there are evident connections to contemporary discussions surrounding women’s status. For example, the response of women leaders, such as New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern and Finland’s Sanna Marin, to the

4 ‘UN Urges Governments to Protect Women from Domestic Violence during Coronavirus Lockdowns’, *SBS News*, 6 April 2020, www.sbs.com.au/news/un-urges-governments-to-protect-women-from-domestic-violence-during-coronavirus-lockdowns.

5 United Nations, ‘Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women’, 9 April 2020, www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406.

6 Anna Fazackerley, ‘Women’s Research Plummet During Lockdown but Articles From Men Increase’, *Guardian*, 12 May 2020, www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/womens-research-plummet-during-lockdown-but-articles-from-men-increase.

7 Anna Patty, ‘University Childcare Services Axed and Outsourced to Private Operators’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 2020, www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/university-childcare-services-axed-and-outsourced-to-private-operators-20200526-p54wkm.html.

COVID-19 pandemic has been much lauded in some quarters, offered as evidence of the effectiveness of women's leadership.⁸ Yet as Belinda Eslick demonstrates, women's political activity still largely exists outside of spaces traditionally considered 'political'. In placing value on the woman who breaks through into the halls of parliament, she argues, we continue to valorise masculine conceptions of politics. Drawing upon the work of Australian historian Marilyn Lake and French philosopher Luce Irigaray, Eslick suggests that women's alternate ways of doing politics should be considered as radical disruptions to the norm and must be seen as legitimate rather than deficient.

How women's lives are memorialised is an important part of ensuring they remain visible and their achievements rightly acknowledged. Toni Church and Rebecca Louise Clarke both consider this issue in relation to Australian museum displays. In a discussion of curatorial practice and methodology, Church advocates that museums must make greater effort to more accurately portray the autonomous voices of colonial Australian women. This is needed in order to make them stand apart from the male actors that have so often shaped public understanding of the frontier and challenge traditional interpretations of their lives. Clarke's article takes an opposing stance as it advocates for the inclusion of women's maternal experiences in museum programs, but at its core also disrupts thinking about traditional museum practice, arguing that museums need to pay more attention to important 'stories of quiet heroism' such as those of mothers, in addition to their traditional focus on grand narratives and national events. Clarke's exploration of the possibilities offered by online storytelling and virtual exhibits take on new relevance as museums explore different ways to stay connected with the public due to their physical closure as a result of the current pandemic.

Several authors also address the depiction and experiences of women's bodies in the past, navigating the intertwined themes of gender and embodiment. Jenny Caligari employs the lens of the individual to focus her analysis, delving into the life of temperance evangelist Bessie Harrison Lee, pictured on the front cover of this issue. She explores Lee's theatricality, dress and public appearances within the context of her activism for women's rights and temperance reform, which sent

8 Louise Champoux-Paillé and Anne-Marie Croteau, 'Why Women Leaders are Excelling During the Coronavirus Pandemic', *Conversation*, 13 May 2020, theconversation.com/why-women-leaders-are-excelling-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-138098.

this working-class woman around the world and into the public eye. The discussion of embodiment and women's dress is picked up again in Kerrie Handasyde's article. Her analysis of women preachers' sartorial choices across three Protestant denominations from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries draws upon contemporary periodicals and reveals the multivalent connections between women's clothing, gender, religious visual culture and the authorisation of women's ministry during these years.

As the authors in this issue demonstrate, the human body is not simply a site for the reproduction of cultural norms concerning gender identity and performance. Central to discussions of embodiment are the opposing yet often coexisting concepts of conformity and contestation. Jessie Matheson foregrounds these ideas in her exploration of the fat women who created a community around the women's pages of the *Western Mail*. She evokes the ambiguity of this space, explaining how the women who wrote letters that appeared in these pages simultaneously challenged and reinforced prevailing cultural narratives about their 'outsized' bodies and feminine ideals. As Elmarí Whyte shows in her article, these themes of conformity and resistance have broader applicability as well. Whyte examines working-class families' complicity in the state coercion of women and girls into domestic service in 1920s Britain. Pointing to economic and moral concerns and using the voices of domestic servants captured in oral histories, she teases out the gendered and class-based dynamics of labour force participation in the aftermath of the First World War to provide a more complex picture of this phenomenon.

The theme of women and domesticity is extended in other contributions to this issue. Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui's article considers the intersection of domestic service and ethnicity in her study of Manbarra (Palm Island) woman Jenny, a late nineteenth-century house servant in the Herbert River Valley, far North Queensland. Her story, alongside that of white women and other women of colour living on the Herbert from the 1870s to the 1890s, reveals the profound contribution they made to the success of the settlement and aims to rectify the invisibility of women on the frontier, which has hitherto been characterised as a masculine landscape. Shifting geographically to the other side of the country but continuing the theme of nineteenth-century domestic work, Alexandra Wallis examines how women at Fremantle Asylum were prescribed domestic chores as a form of rehabilitation for 'mental derangement' after childbirth. In unearthing this piece of history, Wallis speaks to contemporary concerns regarding

postnatal depression and clearly demonstrates the potential of feminist history to inform contemporary debates and teach us about women's responses to challenging circumstances in the present.

This issue of *Lilith* also includes a panel discussion on Pavla Miller's book *Patriarchy* (2017). The contributors engage with contemporary feminist debates surrounding this oft-invoked concept, including those concerning its history, its usefulness and the ways in which it can be best deployed by feminist scholars. The theme of patriarchy—or, indeed, fighting against it—is taken up in the book reviews included in this issue as well. Paige Donaghy reviews Camille Nurka's study *Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery: Deviance, Desire and the Pursuit of Perfection*. This book, enacting queer and feminist methodology, charts the history of labiaplasty from classical antiquity to the present day, and discovers how institutions and medical professionals have long tried to wield authority over women and their bodies. Rosa Campbell shifts focus to examine three recent auto/biographies of Australian feminists Germaine Greer, Iola Mathews and Anne Summers. Taken together, Campbell argues these three works offer an interesting and important insight into the personal effect that the Women's Liberation movement had on three women central to its momentum, but suggests these works do not adequately reflect upon or address the intersection of the movement with race and racism—perhaps an avenue for further inquiry.

The research on display in this issue of *Lilith* engages with a range of questions at the heart of contemporary feminist research and demonstrates the vitality of feminist history writing amongst emerging and established scholars alike. Of course, this publication is the result of an entire community's contributions, creativity and generosity. On behalf of the editorial collective, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the *Lilith* editorial board and journal manager, Dr Alana Piper. As always, we have greatly benefited from your experience and guidance. Thanks also must go to the many peer reviewers, both local and international, who kindly lent their time and expertise to enable us to continue publishing high-calibre, original scholarship. Last but not least, congratulations to the authors, who finally get to see their words in print. Publishing a journal is a collaborative endeavour, and we on the collective have greatly enjoyed being part of the wider network that *Lilith* brings together.

Frequent readers may note that this year we have moved to a new publisher, ANU Press, and to an open-access model of publishing. This is part of our continued commitment to promoting equity and accessibility within the research community. *Lilith's* founding editors first published this journal in 1984, creating a space especially for women's history and feminist scholars. Over three decades later, the journal continues to promote the study of feminist, gender and women's history in ever more expansive terms. The COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the other challenges brought by 2020, has highlighted the precarious foundations underlying advances made towards gender equality. In the face of these challenges, *Lilith* maintains a commitment to providing a platform for feminist historical research. In seeking to understand how gender has shaped lives in the past, we hope to stimulate conversations about how we might continue feminist work into the future.

29 May 2020

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 26*,
published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.26.00