UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
Frontiers, Inc.

The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History by Gerda Lerner
Review by: Myra Rich
Source: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, National Women's Studies Association: Selected Conference Proceedings, 1979 (Spring, 1980), pp. 73-74
Published by: University of Nebraska Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3346311
Accessed: 13-08-2014 01:00 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

University of Nebraska Press and Frontiers, Inc. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies.*

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 108.236.62.123 on Wed, 13 Aug 2014 01:00:50 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History. Gerda Lerner. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. 217 pp. $12.95.

Reviewed by Myra Rich

The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History is a collection of essays by Gerda Lerner. Some have been published previously and will be known to those familiar with the literature of the history of women in America; others are published for the first time in this volume. Taken together the essays survey the field of women's studies. Presented chronologically, they record the development of Lerner's own perspective on the history of women, the current status of the women's movement, and the needs of the profession of women's studies. Her annotations clarify the changes that have taken place in the field and in her own attitudes in the years since each essay was written.

For the most part in these essays, Lerner is interested in historiography and historical method. In three essays on black women, for example, she uses her research findings to make students of women's history aware of the availability of primary sources and to pose questions she feels must be answered: What were the actual experiences and achievements of black women in the past, particularly as they themselves report them? What special influences have they had? Was their historical experience similar to that of black men? To that of white women? What can scholars interested in the history of women learn by comparing the experiences of black and white women and their respective responses to the discrimination they have encountered?

The essay "Community Work of Black Club Women" (1972) suggests that such organized activity depended upon "the existence of a group of educated middle-clas women with some leisure." When this occurred for black women, at a later date than for white women, the clubs they founded "contributed to the survival of the black community." Unlike members of white women's clubs, however, Lerner finds that black club women, though they were middle class, "successfully bridged the class barrier and concerned themselves with issues of importance to poor women, working mothers, tenant farm wives," always emphasizing "race pride and race advancement." Obviously one of the problems of white women's organizations was precisely the inability to cross class as well as race lines. Even with their history of work in abolition, their interaction with black women, as with working women, was "ambivalent." But though white women maintained attitudes which limited their cooperation, they were forced to recognize that black and white women confronted the same institutional barriers to emancipation. Seeing black women respond to discrimination in terms of their race and class as well as their gender proved "radicalizing" for white women who had rarely thought of themselves or their struggle in these terms.

In two essays, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History" (1969) and "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges" (1974), Lerner deals generally with the problems of conceptualizing the areas of women's history. These essays in particular are so cogently organized, so thoroughly in command of the literature and the underlying issues of the field, that historians will refer to them often. When the first of the essays appeared the literature was "topically narrow, predominantly descriptive and generally devoid of interpretation." The early attempts to approach the subject were undertaken by feminist writers, not trained historians. These writers developed what might be called "contribution" history, overemphasizing the position of women as an oppressed group whose major contribution was the achievement of suffrage.

Clearly many other questions needed to be answered, many of which Lerner herself posed for the first time. What do we know about women in the economy? In reform movements? As part of the history of the family? How should women be compared with other groups that have experienced discrimination? How should historians deal with psychological generalizations about women? How should they conceptualize women as a group? What are the contributions of sex, race, and class to an understanding of women's roles in history?

Women need to be considered in terms of their race and class as well as their sex. Lerner's essay "The Lady and the Mill Girl" (1969) was one of the first to stress the divergent needs and experiences of middle-class and working-class women. Historians also need to ask about "the actual *experience* of women in the past," as distinct from a description of women's roles written by men or from the perspective of male-oriented sources. Lerner foresees that studies answering these questions will focus on aspects of human experience which are uniquely female: physiological influences, female friendships, female sexuality, female rituals deriving from their special experiences. Historians of women, according to Lerner, need a new consciousness of categories to take account of women's particular experiences, rather than accepting categories established by male historians whose criteria are wars or political events. Women's categories might take account of institutional and attitudinal changes that specifically affect women, recognizing the diversity of classes, ethnic groups, and other special groups within the general classification.

Finally, on the subject of the current feminist move-

Myra Rich is a member of the Department of History, University of Colorado at Denver. She received her B.A. from Radcliffe, her M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale. Her academic interests include U.S. colonial and revolutionary history, women, and the family in America. She has published in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, *and has an article forthcoming in the* Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal.

This content downloaded from 108.236.62.123 on Wed, 13 Aug 2014 01:00:50 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

ment and its origins, Lerner describes a feminist consciousness which "not only challenged patriarchal values and assumptions, but attempted to substitute for them a feminist system of values and ideas." This feminism produced a struggle for equality and rights. It has more recently become part of a larger struggle toward female emancipation, which Lerner defines as "the quest for autonomy," in which women analyze themselves and "the values by which they will live, and begin to "think of institutional arrangements that will order their environment in line with their needs." Female emancipation suggests a definition of female needs and experience apart from male ideas, past or present, a recognition that female experience, historically and presently, is different from that of men and deserves separate consideration. The modern feminist movement necessarily concerns itself with women's past, with rights and equality, and with full emancipation. Through her use of historical perspective and her continuing involvement with the current movement, Lerner has contributed in these essays not only to women's studies and to the field of history generally, but also to the condition and advancement of women.

The Wanderground. Sally Miller Gearhart. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1979. 196 pp. $5.00.

Reviewed by Lou Roberts

The feminist theme of the dual, interrelated patriarchal hostility towards women and towards nature, most recently expressed in Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature*, also informs the thought of such diverse scholars as anthropologist Sherry Ortner, philosopher Mary Daly, and literary critic Annette Kolodny. We are told that women are physically and psychically closer to nature, and possess latent powers of sensing and intuition, unfostered by technological society. We are encouraged to use such powers in order to heal the widening schism between the human and the natural worlds. Yet can we really envision these powers? Are they simply words which we use, or can we conceive of them in concrete ways?

Sally Miller Gearhart envisions them, in the hill women of *The Wanderground*. Exploring and articulating "the ritual return to nature," her stories are visions and measures of the power women discover when they extricate themselves from urban, technological culture and live by themselves in the wilderness.

Gearhart's book is somewhat eclectic, a sort of feminist supernovel. Her choice of a fantasy genre, to liberate feminist articulation of the unrealized and unattained, results from the politics of her imagination. She uses the imaginative devices of feminist science fiction writers such as Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy, to visualize the woman-nature theme of Griffin and others. It is the combination itself which is original. Her imagination is fertile enough to explore the boundaries of a feminist psychic future within a physically familiar world. Yet she never leaves this world, nor does she people it with extraterrestrial creatures whose powers are incongruous with our own. The very familiarity of her setting intensifies and vitalizes the stories, which are nightmarish at times and yet luminous with woman-possibility.

This juxtaposition of hope and despair describes the setting itself, split between the Wanderground and the Dangerland-City. The Wanderground is an untouched wilderness, full of forests, rivers, and mountains. The hill women who dwell there are seminomadic, using temporary habitats such as caves and pine-needle beds. Although they do not form living communities, the hill women are bound together in a strong sisterhood by their ability to communicate spiritually with each other over great distances.

In contraposition to this green wilderness lies the City, surrounded by the Dangerland. The City is a specter of violence and necrophilia. It projects the misogynistic element of our culture into the future. The City symbolizes the future of patriarchy, a place where women's lives are subject not only to violence, but also to trial and death at the hands of hunters who track and kill those "witches" insubordinate to their rule. The hill women have escaped at great risk from the patriarchal nightmare, seeking the refuge of hills and forests—pariahs wandering in the wilderness.

Some will think such a vision extreme. In Gearhart's reworking of the old archetypes—the conflict of good and evil, the refuge of the wilderness—the lines seem too plainly drawn: madness vs. sanity, death vs. life, city vs. wilderness, men vs. women. Gearhart herself acknowledges this simplicity, justifying it on political grounds: "It is too simple to condemn them all or to praise all of us. But for the sake of the earth and all she holds, that simplicity must be our creed."

What is most interesting about the stories is Gearhart's portrayal of the hill women and their ex-

Lou Roberts is a writer and historian who will receive her M.A. degree from Sarah Lawrence College in the spring of 1980. She has spent the last three years organizing and writing about women in the New York and Cambridge, Massachusetts areas. She works as Gerda Lerner's research assistant and is a frequent contributor to Sojourner: The New England Women's Journal of News, Opinions, and Arts.

This content downloaded from 108.236.62.123 on Wed, 13 Aug 2014 01:00:50 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions