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"Follow the Questions"

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Given the trajectory of my scholarship over the last fifteen years, this seems funny to admit, but when I started graduate school, I did not know that US foreign relations history was a thing. I enrolled at the University of Iowa in 2000 to study US women's history with Linda Kerber. I had graduated the year before from Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college in Appleton, Wisconsin, where I majored in history and minored in gender studies. During my junior year, I had an incredible opportunity to spend a semester at the Newberry Library in Chicago as part of an undergraduate research seminar, and then I spent most of my final year in college writing a senior honors thesis. Those two experiences confirmed my love of research and writing and convinced me that I wanted to pursue a PhD.

Looking back, I had no idea what I was doing. I was clueless about academia, about politics, about a lot of things. I applied to Iowa because Linda was there; both of my undergraduate research projects were on the early US national period, and I was drawn to her work on women's intellectual history.¹ Iowa was the only place I got accepted, and it turned out to be a good fit for me. I spent the first two years of grad school taking seminars on a variety of topics in US and women's history, and I wrote my master's thesis on Flanders Dunbar, a specialist in psychosomatic medicine and a founder of Clinical Pastoral Education. I was proud of how it turned out, but I wasn't sure how I could expand it into a dissertation, and I didn't enjoy the topic enough to try.

And then in my third year two things happened. The first was that I read two works by Ann Laura Stoler. I don't remember if it was in the same class or two different ones, but that year I read both *Race and the Education of Desire* and "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies."² Stoler asked historical questions about imperialism that I had never considered before, and she got me to think more deeply about how race and gender shaped the colonial foundations of the United States. It wasn't that I hadn't been exposed to these ideas before—I was Linda Kerber's student, after all. But for whatever reasons, Stoler's work was what clicked for me that year. I started to think more

¹ Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women: Essays* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

² Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Duke University Press, 1995); Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 829–65.

about how empire affected the lives of ordinary people in racialized and gendered ways, and about how imperialism could manifest itself in everyday encounters.

The second thing was that the United States invaded Iraq. The idea that my country, which of course had emerged from an empire, might have become one itself had never occurred to me (again, I was young and clueless), and all of a sudden the news was full of pundits and commentators asking whether that was the case. I found this to be a fascinating intellectual question; I did not realize that it was one that historians had already been asking for decades. There was no historian of US foreign relations at Iowa at the time. Larry Gelfand, an eminent diplomatic historian and a founder of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), retired from Iowa a few years before I got there, and Michaela Hoenicke Moore did not arrive until the year before I left. But I began to realize that my main interests in history lay at the intersections of women's and foreign relations history.

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Driven by my new interest in US imperialism, I designed comprehensive exam fields in US women's history, British imperialism, and modern Latin America—the last because, I figured, if you want to know whether the United States is an empire, where better to look? Michel Gobat, a historian of Nicaragua who was finishing a book on US interventions in that country, exposed me to the history and historiography of US-Latin American relations, helped me cast about for research topics, and eventually signed on as my co-advisor.³

Iowa provided a lot of independent teaching opportunities for graduate students, and as I worked on my dissertation prospectus, I designed and taught a course on “Race, Gender, and Empire.” It focused half on British imperialism in India and half on US interventions in Latin America. Teaching that class was a great intellectual exercise. It forced me to simplify and de-jargonize my analyses of empire to make them accessible to undergrads. Asking them to think about parallels and differences between British colonialism and US foreign policies helped me sharpen my own thinking. I wish I could remember more about the students who took that class, but like a lot of new instructors I was too wrapped up in my own thinking about the course to consider the students' actual experiences of it.

With Linda and Michel's help, I eventually began writing a dissertation on US women's international activism in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s. Initially I had hoped to cover more territorial and chronological ground, but in researching the archives of organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the League of Women Voters, and the National Woman's Party, I soon discovered that there was enough material for several books on this subject. I chose to focus on Mexico because, unlike other countries in the region, it was too big for the United States to occupy militarily, and because between 1910 and 1940 it underwent a nationalist—and in many ways anti-US—revolution. US women looking to expand their international programs for peace, women's rights, education, and other causes met more resistance in Mexico than they bargained for.

I thought a lot about whether I should make my dissertation truly international by doing research in Mexican archives. A lot of people urged me to, but I wasn't confident enough in my Spanish-language skills to attempt it, and my focus was always on understanding US women's motivations and actions. I stuck to US archives, but even so I ended up using my Spanish a lot. The Mexican women who corresponded with my US subjects

³ Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Duke University Press, 2005).

often wrote in Spanish, and they sent clippings and pamphlets and other materials from Mexico City that proved invaluable.

As I researched and wrote my dissertation, I read widely in the broad field of “the United States and the World” and discovered the work of scholars like Kristin Hoganson, Leila Rupp, Erika Kuhlman, Harriet Alonso, Emily Rosenberg, Ian Tyrrell, and others who were studying women and gender.⁴ I owe them an enormous debt—not just because their work helped shape my own but because thanks to trails they blazed, I never had to justify what I was doing. I didn’t have to convince people of the merits of exploring US women’s international activism in Mexico. The mid-2000s was a period when a lot of scholars wanted to internationalize the study of the United States and were open to questions about the role of women and gender in that process. I found interest and support in my work everywhere, and little, if any, resistance.

This was true at SHAFR as well. The 2006 annual meeting was one of the first conferences I presented at, and I still remember feeling both intimidated and energized by all the people I met and the panels I attended. I am forever grateful to Frank Costigliola, who approached me after my panel and casually suggested I should submit my paper on the 1922 Pan American Conference of Women to *Diplomatic History*. I don’t remember having thought before that about publishing—this was still an era when a candidate could expect some degree of success on the job market even without a publication record. But I took Frank’s suggestion and ended up with an article in the flagship US foreign relations journal just as I hit the job market in the fall of 2007. I’ve attended SHAFR meetings ever since then, and it is wonderful to be at a point in my career where I can start paying off my debts to earlier generations by mentoring members of younger ones.

As I revised my dissertation, I continued to benefit enormously from the supportive community at SHAFR, from the rich scholarship on US women’s international activism that began to appear regularly, and from my involvement with launching Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar’s incredible database, *Women and Social Movements, International*.⁵ One of the best revisions I made was to reframe my thesis around a distinction between internationalism and transnationalism. While the latter signified a genuine effort to connect across borders, the former, I argue, reified nationality and the nation-state. US women’s efforts in Mexico failed largely because they approached them from an *internationalist* rather than a *transnationalist* mindset.⁶ That argument was informed by all of the scholars I mentioned above as well as the rich debates about transnationalism that appeared in places like the *American Historical Review*.⁷

⁴ Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (Yale University Press, 1998); Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Erika A. Kuhlman, *Petticoats and White Feathers: Gender Conformity, Race, the Progressive Peace Movement, and the Debate Over War, 1895-1919* (Greenwood Press, 1997); Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women’s Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women’s Rights* (Syracuse University Press, 1993); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Harvard University Press, 1999); Ian Tyrrell, *Woman’s World/Woman’s Empire: The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880-1930* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁵ <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international-1840-present>

⁶ Megan Threlkeld, *Pan American Women: U.S. Internationalists and Revolutionary Mexico* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 5.

⁷ C. A. Bayly et al., “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441–64.

My first book, *Pan American Women: U.S. Internationalists and Revolutionary Mexico*, was published in 2014, and I continued building on many of the same themes as I transitioned into my second. While in the archives I regularly came across references to “world citizenship.” A woman would proclaim herself a “citizen of the world,” but she would never elaborate on what that meant. What did world citizenship mean in the early twentieth century? What did it mean to women? Why did they keep using that phrase? I wrote my second book, *Citizens of the World: U.S. Women and Global Government*, published just last year, to answer those questions.⁸

If I were to offer one piece of advice for graduate students today, it would be to trust your gut about what intrigues you. Pay attention to which questions stimulate you and which ones don't. Before I even knew that US foreign relations history was a thing, I was drawn to questions about the role of the United States in the world and how US women in particular saw that role. Thanks to the guidance, influence, and work of countless other scholars, I have been able to parlay my pursuit of those questions into a rewarding career.

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⁸ For an overview of what I found, see Megan Threlkeld, “I wrote this book because I wanted to know what early 20th-C US women meant when they called themselves #CitizensoftheWorld,” Twitter, May 2, 2022, 10:13am, <https://twitter.com/MeganThrelkeld/status/1521130877811666955>. See also Threlkeld, *Citizens of the World: U.S. Women and Global Government* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 1-3.