

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Transgressing with Rediscovery: The “Forgotten No More” Essay

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<1>Raised in the Indian English-medium education system,⁽¹⁾ I am well-acquainted with the pedagogical direction in a traditional classroom and its “memorize-and-regurgitate” evaluation system. The powers that be select materials, the instructor teaches the materials, and the students who remember the most fare the best.

<2>Currently, as an early-career academic at a Historically Black University, I aspire to make my course materials diverse beyond the literary canon in order to provide my students with a well-rounded appreciation of nineteenth-century literature and its global contexts. I also aim to transgress traditional regurgitation pedagogy with student-driven assignments that require analysis rather than memorization. But a new hurdle—transitioning to an online classroom due to the COVID-19 pandemic—coincided with my first semester as an Assistant Professor. I had chosen “Women’s Rights and Voices in the Nineteenth Century” as the theme of the introductory humanities course I would teach, and I wondered how to make an entire semester’s worth of remote classes on gender equality engrossing for my students.

<3>Since I would be teaching a humanities course, my course material was not restricted to literature. I diversified the syllabus boldly, both in terms of geographical location and genre. I added photographers, painters, poets, translators, scientists, and entrepreneurs to the syllabus. While such diversification of the course materials transcends the barriers erected by the standard English curriculum, it does little to alter its customary pedagogical directionality: the instructor still predetermines the materials that the students read and analyze. I worried that a remote classroom on Zoom, devoid of the spontaneity and energy of an in-person setting, would be unable to sustain fifteen weeks of conventional learning.

<4>While still looking for materials to add to the reading list, I discovered an article in the “Overlooked” obituary series of the *New York Times* on a remarkable education activist from India: Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (Khan). I had never heard of her prior to reading the article. Her belated obituary made me realize that part of being an instructor and scholar of the nineteenth century involves the continued rediscovery of such overlooked figures. However, considering the gamut of existing world literature and culture situated in the Victorian era, this process of rediscovery risks being unidirectional, especially when one embarks on it alone. For

example, in my search for overlooked women writers, activists, and artists, I would probably never have stumbled upon the story of American game designer Elizabeth J. Magie, the brains behind *Monopoly*, as one of my students did! I decided to use my remote classroom as a space for students to discover and teach me about nineteenth-century figures as I simultaneously educated them in my academic discipline. Thus, the “Forgotten No More” essay was conceived (see [Appendix 1](#)). This written assignment transgressed standard pedagogical directionality, enabling my students to contribute information of their choosing to our knowledge base rather than exclusively absorbing information predetermined for them.

<5>The only content-based parameters I set for the “Forgotten No More” essay were that students had to choose a nineteenth-century woman from any part of the world who had notable achievements in any field and who has been pushed into obscurity. Devoid of the pressures of retaining information from the sequential course readings or the stress of a timed online examination, this assignment was especially effective in the remote classroom. Students had the time and liberty to conduct research with online materials of their choice and select a historical figure they deemed inspiring. The assignment had a threefold advantage in the unfamiliar remote setting of our classroom. First, it gave my students a stimulating cognitive responsibility, distinct from my Zoom lectures and pre-selected readings. Second, since the assignment was not based on the specific materials I taught, students who were unable to attend all synchronous virtual lectures due to technological inequities were still able to complete the essay successfully. And third, I gained a novel perspective of the nineteenth century through my students’ asynchronous online research into obscure historical figures and the subsequent discoveries they revealed in their essays.

<6>In the weeks prior to the due date, I helped my students prepare their “Forgotten No More” essays through the following phases: reading, discussion, rediscovery, review, and writing. Below, I describe each phase in detail.

Reading

<7>For a large number of my first-year students, the “Forgotten No More” essay would be the first university-level humanities essay they would ever write. This made the freedom they had in choosing a historical figure simultaneously exciting and challenging because they had no specific material on which to base their essay. New writers in my class realized quickly that the choice of topic can make or break one’s writing as much as the quality of one’s composition. Because their primary responsibility prior to drafting was making this important selection, I assigned some exemplary readings, which I procured and shared with my students online. We began with two timelines of women’s history,⁽²⁾ which acquainted my students with obscure names such as Arabella Mansfield, the first woman lawyer in the United States, and Mary Dixon Kies, the first woman to receive a US Patent. Then we read a few translations of French poetry by Indian writer Toru Dutt as examples of “forgotten” nineteenth-century literature outside of the British-American literary canon. Finally, we read the *New York Times* obituary of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati as a model article, proximate in genre to the essays my students were expected to compose.

Discussion

<8>I led a synchronous class discussion following each reading. Students who were unable to attend all synchronous classes had the opportunity to discuss the readings in a weekly asynchronous discussion forum. Through discussion, I wanted my students to address the primary question that would eventually help them justify their own choices of historical figures: *Why are some women achievers forgotten?* During our discussion of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, one student noted that the well-traveled educator's international stature acted like a double-edged sword and led to her obscurity—the British did not appreciate her adherence to Indian attire and culture, and the Indians did not take kindly to her religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. Therefore, both sides found it easier to simply forget her and her discomfiting unconventionality.

<9>The age-old distrust of female contributions to a traditionally “male” field was another reason for obscurity that my students identified. For example, English fossil-collector Mary Anning was dismissed by her male contemporaries as an amateur despite her now-known contributions to the early development of paleontology (Eylott). This gender-based dismissal turned out to be an inspiration for one of my students who wrote their essay on American climate scientist Eunice Foote, whose identification of the greenhouse effect was largely forgotten as the work of an amateur. And, finally, as another student pointed out in class and then in their essay, some women achievers of color are forgotten because another in their field (often male and/or white) dominates the public imagination. This student wrote their essay about Bessie Coleman, the first female pilot of African American and Native American descent, whose memory is unfortunately eclipsed by Amelia Earhart's popularity.

Rediscovery

<10>At the outset, I encouraged students to rediscover forgotten women achievers with a simple online search. For example, one of my students expressed the desire to write about Black women scientists, and my advice for them was to simply begin with a Google search for “nineteenth-century African-American women scientists.” The student was astounded by the sheer number of lists and timelines the search yielded, enabling them to shortlist a few women to conduct focused research on and make a final selection. The readings and discussions had provided my students with the necessary impetus to recuperate a nineteenth-century figure either born female or who identified as a woman from the obscurity to which they had been banished. As students embarked on their quests for rediscovery on their own, I was on standby in case they needed further guidance, which I offered through both synchronous office hours and asynchronous email correspondence.

<11>As I had anticipated, I received more email requests for guidance than synchronous office hour visits, which was symptomatic of the semester's remote mode of instruction. The requests for guidance from students mostly involved questions regarding the appropriateness of their choice. Some students wanted to know whether the women they had shortlisted were “good enough” to write about; most of the time they were. Others wanted to be reassured that the figure they had selected was not already “famous.” This enabled me to teach them the process of further investigation based on information that is easily accessible online. I invited students to ask questions such as: *Do the online biographies of the historical figure of my choice mention accolades? If yes, what kind of awards did this woman receive in her lifetime? Is there a film*

based on her life? I have also included these directions for further investigation and fine tuning in the assignment prompt.

Review

<12>I held a synchronous review session for students to discuss their selections of historical figures before they began writing. Each student had a few minutes to briefly discuss their choice and share with me and their peers their justification for bringing their chosen nineteenth-century figure back from obscurity. This review session was aimed at correcting simple but costly errors, such as choices from a different century. My students had extensive freedom in this regard. As long as their chosen figure was alive in the nineteenth century for even a year, they would fulfill the temporal requirement of the essay. This led to essays on figures such as American contralto Marian Anderson, who was born in 1897. The review session facilitated student success by ensuring that those who had erroneously chosen figures from an entirely different century could alter their choices in time.

<13>In addition to ensuring students met the assignment criteria, the review session also led me to a fascinating realization about the assumed fame of certain figures, thereby changing my own worldview. I had thought that the American author Louisa May Alcott was quite renowned. But there was very little recognition from the class as one student pronounced their choice to be Alcott. I was obliged to approve the author as a subject for the “Forgotten No More” essay, realizing that the frequently-adapted *Little Women* is more famous than its creator (and worrying momentarily for Jane Austen before promptly dismissing my fear as an impossibility).

<14>But the review session also familiarized me with some women at the other end of the obscurity spectrum, with achievements that are noteworthy despite not being global. For example, a student wrote about Cassandra Fox, claiming her as a family relation. Fox was a Caribbean-American woman who, frustrated by the jarring lack of birth and death records of enslaved Black people in America, began recording births and deaths in her family (“The Fox Family”).

<15>Finally, as I had intended and hoped, the review session showed that some of my students had stumbled upon the promising territory of further research and argumentation, with their “Forgotten No More” essays serving as breeding grounds for subsequent research. One of my students had chosen to write about Dr. James Barry, an Irish surgeon who was born female and lived as a man. Welcoming this choice in the safe space of our course on nineteenth-century women, I encouraged the student to delve into studying the complex gender identity of Barry beyond my classroom. Another student wrote about Rebecca Felton, an American white supremacist who also happened to be the first woman to serve in the US Senate. I approved this unusual choice, as my student made the case that problematic female figures also need to be remembered and held accountable for their choices, adding nuance to our understanding of nineteenth-century women’s contributions as not universally positive.

Writing

<16>After the review session, my students had three days to draft their essays. I did not design the “Forgotten No More” essay as a process-based assignment. Therefore, much of the preparation process was carried out through in-class or online discussions and in the review session. Regardless, I was available via email and during office hours for answering last-minute questions. Students submitted their completed essays online.

<17>Based on the seventy essays my students wrote, I have compiled a list of thirty-nine nineteenth-century “forgotten” women achievers (see [Appendix 2](#)). The list excludes the handful of essays that did not fulfill the assignment’s parameters, such as selecting a celebrated nineteenth-century figure or a historical figure, albeit forgotten, from a different century. The list only counts once those historical figures chosen by multiple students; Rebecca Lee Crumpler, Nancy Green, Frances Harper, and Leonora O’Reilly appeared to be favorites. These women were promptly transformed from forgotten to popular in my remote classroom.

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Notes

(1)In private English-medium institutions, the principal medium of instruction is English. That is, all subjects, except a second “vernacular” language, are taught in English.(△)

(2)See Milligan, Sweet.(△)

Appendix 1: Assignment Prompt: “Forgotten No More” Essay

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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Appendix 2: List of Nineteenth-Century Historical Figures

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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