

Asking Questions, Contesting Archives, and Finding Women in the Past
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Thank you, Lucinda Manning, for inviting me to participate in this very exciting panel. Preparing for it has encouraged me to go back some 50 years when I began graduate study in history and consider how much has changed since then. When I began these studies, I found only two other women in graduate history courses and no women faculty at all in either history or the language and literature courses I was taking. My instructors were well known and highly regarded male scholars for whom I had a great deal of respect. However, the history they taught was more about great white men in the past, the culture and institutions that they formed and continued to dominate. Small wonder that after that first year of study I took a leave of 11 years to marry, work to put my husband through law school, and have two children!

Things were beginning to change for the better as I returned to graduate school in the early 1970s. We still had only a few examples of historical studies of women, but now there was greater interest in studying different classes. I also found some female faculty members, and one of them specialized in Spanish history. When I read in one of her classes a novella by Miguel Cervantes about two young homeless boys who joined an underworld organization in 16th-century Seville, I asked my Spanish history professor if she would direct me in writing a dissertation on the city of Seville from the gutter up, so to speak. She agreed and also encouraged me to order copies of manuscripts about the history of Seville available

through the British Museum so I could begin to get acquainted with the challenges of reading the paleography of the early modern period—an issue that so many archivists know very well.

I spent the year of 1974-75 in Spain (the year that Franco died) reading countless documents about crime in the archives of Seville. The only women I found in these documents were prostitutes, both legal and illegal, the very poor women of the city who city fathers believed could easily become prostitutes or fall into other forms of crime, and a few wealthy women who provided charitable dowries so that poor girls could marry. With very few exceptions, Spanish archivists were very helpful in locating documents that I requested, and they told me about Spanish studies related to these documents that were just being published. We historians owe so much to archivists who not only bring us the documents we know about and request; they also suggest others that could be relevant. Here I want to say thank you on behalf of myself and all historians. I also want to raise a question that we might talk about in our discussion time: how can historians and archivists collaborate better both in doing the work we care about so deeply and passing our knowledge of documentary evidence on to the graduate students we help to train?

Encouraged in the 1980's by the growing interest in publications on difference in history, I published my dissertation and two essays on prostitution.ⁱ My second book about early modern Seville focused on gender and disorder.ⁱⁱ By now women historians were organizing in caucuses and infiltrating the governing bodies of scholarly organizations. At a meeting of the American Historical Association in 2005, four of us (who did very different historical studies of women)

decided to present a panel on “Women in the Documents.” Subsequently published in the *Journal of Women’s History*,ⁱⁱⁱ the responses we received prompted us to invite several other historians to contribute essays to a volume that we called *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, published in 2010.^{iv} We are delighted that our book has been read and praised by many historians and archivists. In addition, our book was awarded the Barbara Penny Kanner Prize from the WAWH in 2011. We have been invited to make presentations to several meetings of historians and archivists.

Some have encouraged us to compile a second book about women’s history and archives, a project in which the University of Illinois Press has once again expressed interest. This raises more questions that I hope we will consider in our discussion this morning: what suggestions would you archivists make for this second book in its preliminary phases—what analysis or context should we include more of, for example, and how can we be more aware of archival processes, limitations, or theoretical studies? What are the possibilities and problems of archivists’ and historians’ work together?

Now I want to tell you briefly about the process of putting together *Contesting Archives* and then go into some depth by describing my own experiences in writing an essay on a Muslim slave woman in early modern Spain for this book. In both cases, I will welcome your comments and questions during our discussion time.

Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry Katz, and I agreed that we wanted to work on this volume as colleagues dedicated to women’s history and eager to invite others to

consider the key role that archives play in our work. Inspired by scholars such as Antoinette Burton, Alice Kessler Harris, Marlene Manoff, and Nell Irvin Painter, we knew that we wanted to include many different historians studying their subjects from a wide variety of places and periods of time, consciously using specific ways of finding women in historical sources.^v

Blithely Nupur Chaudhuri and Sherry Katz and I set off on the adventure of not only becoming more aware of our own methodologies for mining the archives for evidence about women in the past, but also working alongside many other historians on the same quest. In publishing our book, *Contesting Archives*, we learned a lot about our own individual ways of writing history. And, even more importantly, we developed a community of historians of women—15 very distinct individuals working in archives as different as 19th-century Qajar Iran and post-war Communist Poland, or as contrasting as colonial Mexico and 20th-century Las Vegas.

The historians in our book found 15 different kinds of archival sources and developed 15 distinct ways of utilizing those documents—some like me and Daniel Haworth, attempting to work with a single official document, others like Sherry Katz and Lisa Sousa, who found ways to integrate a variety of sources, and some like Kathleen Sheldon and Joanne Goodwin, who each had to literally create a new archive. What brought us all together was the conviction that an archive is not simply a repository of information, but a site for the production of knowledge, an invitation for questions and challenges. Now, thanks to the invitation of Lucinda Manning, we are speaking to you at this archivists' conference and realizing as well the possibilities for more community among historians and archivists, especially

those working with the challenges of finding documents and books that are so important to women and other people underrepresented in history.

As we received first drafts of the essays, we began to notice how they complemented one another. Through emails and conferences we wanted our contributors to become familiar with one another and see how their work was fitting into the volume-in-the-making. As I observed these people speaking about their essays on conference panels and roundtables, I could see that they listened and spoke with pleasure, obviously recognizing the possibilities as well as the challenges of collaboration. At that point, *Contesting Archives* became a collegial project in every sense of the word.

We three editor/compiler shared the work of reading through drafts and making suggestions for revisions. Because we really cared about making this a useful and exciting book, we had our contributors respond to our comments and suggestions in several drafts. Certainly, the final round of requested revisions brought more eye-rolling than great enthusiasm, but most of our authors told us later how much they appreciated our careful reading and revising suggestions.

We asked each author to consciously address the challenges faced in locating primary materials and to write about their process of finding women in the past in these materials. To further illustrate this, I want to tell you about my own experiences in uncovering Fatima, who lived in late 16th-century Spain. I first met her in the reading room of the National Historical Archive in Madrid. In the midst of reading Inquisition records, I was feeling so depressed about the terrible situation of being called in before inquisitors that I was just about ready to tie up the tall

bundle of documents and send it all back to the archival stacks. Suddenly a Muslim slave woman's story jumped off the page I was reading and grabbed my attention. She insisted in her hearing with an inquisitor that she was Fatima and not Ana, the Christian name that a priest said he had given her when he had baptized her in a hospital.

Even more audaciously, she flatly denied the priest's story that she had requested to be baptized and said, instead, that she was a Muslim and always would be Muslim, that if she had been baptized, she must have been out of her mind.^{vi} In all my research, I have not come across such a brazen challenge to such fearsome authorities who literally had the power of life and death—in this case, priests and inquisitors who knew very well how to classify and identify the people unfortunate enough to have fallen in their hands—and also to get the confessions they wanted.

As I worked on this report and tried to understand Fatima's story, I realized that I needed to be much more aware of how I was using this document, what questions I was asking of it, and how I could reach conclusions about what it was telling me. The first thing I noticed about her was that she was responding to inquisitors in a power situation that was very dangerous for her. These men had the power to require her to respond to their questions and could literally determine her fate. Most of the people called before inquisitors tried to answer carefully, knowing that their lives were at stake. Fatima's position was even more insecure because inquisitors considered her a convert from Islam, one of those Muslims of Spain who had to convert to Christianity in the early 16th century or leave their Spanish homes

after centuries of settlement there. Called “Moriscos” (moor-like), they were believed to be false Christians, heretics who threatened the Church from within.

The single document we have for Fatima tells about her only indirectly and must be read as an account of inquisitors or employees of the Holy Office who worked within the context of often-used formulae and unexamined assumptions. These men wrote down what they heard as inquisitors and asked questions to elicit responses they wanted, clearly reinforcing a form of ventriloquism in which the powerful speak for the powerless.^{vii} Moreover, in this power context, suspects and witnesses knew that they must speak carefully to inquisitors. Fatima, however, broke this pattern of deference to official power, for she insisted to both neighbors and inquisitors that she must be the one to define herself.

In reading the document about Fatima, I recognized not only the imbalance of power between her and her questioners; I also realized that I needed to read it “against the grain.”^{viii} Using the example of feminist historians and literary scholars, I looked beneath surface meanings for subtexts and silences that can tell us more than the formulaic questions and responses that inquisitors sought and recorded in official male-centered documents.^{ix}

For example, one witness said that when he had asked Fatima if she were Christian, she had responded that when they baptized her and converted her to Christianity, she was “crazy and without sanity and without judgment . . . and that now because she wanted to have the heart of a Moor and is said to be Christian, that she wants nothing but to be a Moor.” Conversion in this case obviously meant something different to Fatima than it did to inquisitors who regarded it as sacred

and authorized—certainly not to be casually discarded. To Fatima, it seemed to be an action carried out upon her when she was ill in a hospital and crazy and without judgment—or, perhaps, but she carefully does not say this—it was her own strategy for survival that she believed she could abandon when she had recovered.

Finally, unable to find any other documentary source that was specifically about her, I recognized that this one Inquisition record by itself could tell us only a part of Fatima's story. Contextualizing the single Inquisition document, then, became essential. Fortunately, I had just spent 15 years researching a book about the Moriscos, which I titled *The Handless Maiden*, after one of the Moriscos' stories that I believe is a metaphor for their experiences in early modern Spain.^x Although we do not know more specific information about Fatima and her female owner, we do know that Muslim slaves were not required to convert to Christianity and that becoming a Christian could be a means of being freed from slavery if the owner agreed. Furthermore, some Muslim slaves had been born into slavery, but others had been born as Moriscos who joined a large-scale rebellion against their Christian rulers later in 16th-century Spain and were enslaved when captured as rebels.

The conflicting stories of Fatima and the priest who said he baptized her in the hospital when she was ill become more understandable as we look at the medical care provided in hospitals in early modern Spain and the few means that patients had of getting better care. Often in times of plague and other epidemics, hospitals simply became places to confine infected people in order to protect those who were still healthy. Being taken to a hospital, in fact, could be a death sentence,

for there the patient would be surrounded by others with diseases that doctors had few effective ways to cure.^{xi}

To better analyze the many kinds of evidence that I had found for Moriscos, slaves, and hospital care, respectively, I found very helpful insights from scholars in politics, anthropology, and post-colonial and cultural criticism. For example, to help understand Fatima's possible behavior in the hospital, anthropologist James C. Scott's theory of the "weapons of the weak" suggests that she may have pretended a slow-witted conformity to hospital authorities as a means of survival.^{xii} Yet when she survived and was released from the hospital, Fatima reasserted her Muslim identity. Her action may have stemmed from naiveté, but it also suggests that Fatima knew her own identity and wanted to speak for herself.

As post-colonialist scholars and cultural critics have argued, we need to listen to the disempowered person who dares to use her own voice, fully aware of the power constrictions of her society. When we assume to speak for her, postcolonial critics point out, we act as "colonizers."^{xiii} In the words of Trinh Minh-ha, "A conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them' is a conversation in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence."^{xiv}

We do not know the beginning of Fatima's life story, nor do we know its end. According to this single Inquisition record, she was found guilty and sentenced to 200 lashes and—if she survived that brutal whipping—confinement in a convent where she would be subject to a discipline that would teach her to become a "true Christian." Would her slave status continue in the convent, or did she somehow die

a free woman? Unfortunately, I have found no documents to answer these questions.

I like to think that Fatima's story has not ended. Her words in a single Inquisition document continue to teach us that we do not have to leave the disenfranchised in silent obscurity simply because they do not appear in their own writings or in multiple documents. Because she insisted on telling her own story to inquisitors, we realize that we can listen to voices that do come through in very indirect and far-from-neutral documents. We can consider the power situation of the writings, contextualize them, and read them against the grain, seeking layers of meanings in the words that are used and the information that is omitted.

Fatima continues to teach us the importance of recognizing individuals in historical records—not simply for the sake of “individualism,” but because a person such as Fatima gives a face or voice to the past. She reminds us that we need to become much more aware of developing a methodology for working on those muted people in history that we so often overlook. She also challenges me—and all of us, I believe—to not abandon the study of women in the past simply because they do not appear in their own writings or in multiple documents.

Although we know that Fatima died sometime in the past, her words in this single document continue to ring out loud and clear. This Muslim slave woman challenges assumptions that historians must leave the disenfranchised in silent obscurity. She personalizes and helps to bring into human scale the institutions she encountered: slavery, the hospital, the Inquisition, an infant Spanish state facing thousands of rebels. She demonstrates strategies for self-empowerment that

disenfranchised people develop and find ways to use. Fatima shows us the possibilities even more than the limitations of available evidence, and she opens for us the world of minority slave women, a world of women with no legal status who suffered, but also resisted and challenged official power.

ⁱ Crime and Society in Early Modern Seville (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1980). Essays on prostitutes include "'Lost Women' in Early Modern Seville: The Politics of Prostitution," Feminist Studies IV:1 (1978), and in Social History of Western Civilization, vol. I, ed. Richard M. Golden (St. Martin's Press, 1992); and "Deviant Insiders: Legalized Prostitutes and a Consciousness of Women in Early Modern Seville," Comparative Studies in Society and History 27, no. 1 (1985):138-58.

ⁱⁱ The book is Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville, Princeton University Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ "History Practice: Finding Women in the Archives," Journal of Women's History 20:1 (spring 2008), 149-216.

^{iv} University of Illinois Press, 2010.

^v Antoinette Burton, ed., Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History (Duke University Press, 2005); Alice Kessler Harris, "Social History," in Eric Foner, ed., The New American Social History (Temple University Press, 1997), 231-55; Marlene Manoff, "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines," Portal: Libraries and the Academy 4, no. 1 (2004), 10; Nell Irvin Painter, "Writing Biographies of Women," Journal of Women's History 9, no. 2 (1997): 160.

^{vi} This case appears in Archivo Histórico Nacional (hereafter AHN), Inquisición, legajo 1953, number 19 (1584).

^{vii} Ventriloquism and confession are discussed in Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); and Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Random House, 1995), 35-42, especially.

^{viii} For reading against the grain, see Annette Kuhn, "Passionate Detachment," in Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 15.

^{ix} Joëlle Rollo-Koster demonstrates how a papal document can be useful in writing women's history in her essay, "The Women of Papal Avignon: A New Source," Journal of Women's History VIII:1 (Spring 1996): 36-59. In an interesting parallel to how we are trying to read an Inquisition record to uncover the life of Fatima, Linda

Gordon provides an excellent example of finding the voices of poor immigrants in records kept by social workers in 19th and 20th-century Boston in her book, Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). 13-17, especially.

^x Mary Elizabeth Perry, The Handless Maiden: Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

^{xi} I discuss hospitals and disease in my book, Crime and Society, 238-40, especially; for more on medicine in Spain at this time, see Luis S. Granjel, La medicina española del siglo XVII (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1978), passim; for a broader view of hospitals and history, see Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (New York: Pantheon, 1965).

^{xii} James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

^{xiii} Examples include Ada María Díaz who discusses the invisible invisibility of minority women in "Toward an Understanding of Feminismo Hispánico in the USA," in Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer, eds., Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 51-61. More on the challenges of studying minority women is found in Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., Feminists Theorize the Political (New York: Routledge, 1992), 144-66; bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990); Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Methuen, 1985); Joan W. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Paul Julian Smith, Representing the Other: "Race," Text, and Gender in Spanish and Spanish American Narrative (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Sidonie Smith, "Who's Talking/Who's Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative," Signs 18, no 2 (Winter 1993): 392-407; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds (London: Methuen, 1987); Trinh Minh-ha, When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1991)

^{xiv} Trinh Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 67.