

### Session Title

“Where are the Fun Girls?” Women’s History in the Public Realm

### Link to Session [here](#)

### Session Participants

*Chair:* Valerie Paley, New-York Historical Society, Center for Women’s History

*Commentator:* Valerie Matsumoto, University of California, Los Angeles

*Panelists:* Valerie Paley, New-York Historical Society, Center for Women’s History

Sarah Gordon, New-York Historical Society

Joanna Scutts, New-York Historical Society

Sarah Litvin, New-York Historical Society

### Overview of the Session

In 2017, the New-York Historical Society opened the Center for Women’s History, the first institution in the nation within the walls of a museum dedicated to enriching the public understanding of the American past through a focus on women. Anchoring the physical space of the Center is an interactive digital installation, “Women’s Voices,” which showcases a network of famous and unsung women from New York’s history and aims to introduce visitors to women’s history in an engaging and accessible way. The scholars who worked on this innovative media piece discuss the creative process and its research challenges, chiefly the effort to resist the “hall of fame” treatment, which would merely replace a pantheon of Great Men with one of Great Women. Instead, “Women’s Voices” highlights collective movements over individuals and respects the insights of feminists such as Audre Lorde, who insisted that “Without community there is no liberation.” Yet the tension remains, between the desire to enlighten visitors and the need to supply them with familiar faces (those “fun girls”—as an early tester demanded to see). A group of public and academic historians will use the project as a point of departure to address larger questions of women’s history and public history.

### NCHE Habits of Mind

- Understand the impact made by individuals, groups and institutions at local, national and global levels both in effecting change and in ensuring continuity.

In this session, the panelists return to the ideas of connections numerous times. In constructing the exhibit, and in having individuals experience it, their goal is to see the connections between different individuals and groups, different eras, and different topics, and to find meaning not chronologically, but thematically and through relationships.

- Realize that all individuals are decision makers, but that personal and public choices are often restricted by time, place, and circumstance.

As important as this habit of mind is in the context of studying women in the public realm, it also seems relevant in the creation, research, and interpretation of this exhibit. Having students analyze the women presented, as well as the research

choices made in the presentation of the exhibit, allows them to think deeply about how decisions can impact the course of history, but also the presentation of it.

### **Key Points for Potential Focus in Session or Interview**

This session provides three different avenues for connections to history courses and students. First, from 3:35-11:30 in the session, it helps teachers and students see what the research process might look like in creating history for public consumption. In doing so, it raises important questions about the “entertainment” value of history, what types of presentation and interaction are most valuable, what information should be included and excluded, how much information should be visible on each part of the digital media presentation, and several other questions specifically about how to choose the women included in the exhibit.

The second component that will be useful for both teachers and students is from 11:30-26:48, and it allows the listener to think about how subjects are selected for a public history project. The listener learns more about the goals of the panelists in creating the exhibit, and how they went about trying to achieve those. This portion helps the listener to better understand the selection process for the women included in the exhibit and the motivations for choosing a broader cross-section of women’s history than just the well-known, “badass” women of history. One panelist counters the oft-quoted phrase, arguing that well-behaved women DO make history, and they’re an important part of the story. This section also more fully explains the “tags” that the panelists refer to throughout the session.

The third component that may be useful for teachers and students is listening to the iteration process described by the panelists. From 26:48- 49:10, the panelists discuss the process of shaping the exhibit based on the feedback of both adults and young people as they experience the exhibit. It is helpful in illuminating the titular question of the session, and gives further insight into what the goals of the exhibit were. This portion also continues the explanations of the “tags” and the logistical challenges of presenting an exhibit that isn’t centered on a timeline, while providing opportunities for people (students especially) to find a specific biography, topic, or era within an exhibit that isn’t oriented by chronology.

The video interview with the panelists would also be helpful for teachers and students. It is an extension of how they chose the women who were included and how we move past the “pop history” phenomenon that focuses on the “firsts” and “bests” rather than the full story of women in history. It’s also a helpful reminder that as important as it is to study women in history, as one panelist says, “Women don’t *emerge* in the story; they’ve been there all along.” Seeing women as an integral part of the narrative, especially in eras where they have not been recognized traditionally, helps tell a more complete version of history.

**Potential Resources for Classroom Use**

1. Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) available: "Women have always worked" with Alice Kessler-Harris
2. Part 2 of "Women have always worked," the MOOC with Alice Kessler-Harris.
3. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview*
4. Website for the exhibit, "New York Rising" at the NYHS (discussed at the beginning of the session)
5. Website for the exhibit, "Women's Voices"
6. Women's Suffrage Student Discovery Set from the Library of Congress
7. National Archives' Library Information Center resources on Women
8. Women's history primary sources from The Archivists' Roundtable of Metropolitan New York

**Inquiry/Discussion Questions**

1. How can we use biography as a way into larger questions of women's history? How do we go beyond biography to think about how this person's life looks different from others around her?
2. How do we chart the way a woman is depicted over time? What is gendered about the way she is visually represented?
3. How do we move beyond traditional ways of "grouping" women to build new understandings of how these people connect? What are other themes/connections that we can use to learn about women throughout history, aside from chronology?
4. How do we study and learn from the unnamed people in history?
5. How can we enrich stories from a time when traditional media isn't available?