

“There is No Silence in the Archive, There are Silencers”

Thavolia Glymph in Conversation about Gerda Lerner with Levke Harders

*Levke Harders: Thavolia Glymph, thank you for taking the time to have this conversation about Gerda Lerner.¹ You are the Peabody Family Distinguished Professor of History at Duke University in the United States. Your work focuses on the history of the US South, on African American history, gender history, and the history of the US Civil War. Combining your research interests, you have recently published *The Women's Fight. The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom and Nation*.² During your academic career, you have been in close contact with Gerda Lerner. How did you meet her?*

Thavolia Glymph: My memory about our first meeting is a bit indistinct. But I do know that the first time, beyond conference sightings, we met in person was in Durham, North Carolina, only some twelve years before she passed away. My personal (and academic) connection to Gerda Lerner was thus relatively short, much briefer than for many historians who knew her. But I felt already that I knew her because I knew her work, her body of scholarship. And if you know anything about her, you know that she was very strong in her opinions, and I liked that. She welcomed me into her world, her life as an academic and her personal life. And so, we had many, many walks in Duke Forest and many conversations over coffee and sweets. Like me, Gerda enjoyed letter writing. I treasured her letters, some long, some short. They gave encouragement even when she disagreed with me about one thing or another. Sometimes, she wrote that she thought that maybe I should think about something in a different way. But those letters were important as well.

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- 2 Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight. The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation*, Chapel Hill 2020.

Harders: How would you describe Gerda Lerner as a mentor and as a friend?

Glymph: First, as a mentor, I was not one of her students, I was not formally trained by her, but she was very generous and showed an interest in what I was doing, how she thought my work related to her work, and how it was different from what she had done. She was just always very encouraging, even when we disagreed on some things. For example, my first book, *Out of the House of Bondage*,³ I remember her disappointment that I did not say anything about the Grimké Sisters. That was, indeed, a missed opportunity. The Grimké Sisters, born in South Carolina in a slaveholding family, became abolitionists and were the subject of Lerner's dissertation which was published in 1967.⁴ My book may also have appeared to her to be too insistent on the disagreements between White women and Black women, to be too insistent on the warfare, as I called it, within the plantation household. And in doing that, it seemed to her to ignore the areas in which Black women and White women worked together. Her book on the Grimké Sisters did that and I think she thought I might do more of that. But mine was a different project.

In general, Gerda's concern was more largely to argue that the story of women, the history of women, is also one in which women have worked together across race and class lines. I think she became more interested in and accepting of a history of women that was less pretty in this regard, a history of women that dealt insistently with questions of class and race and gender in different ways. For Gerda Lerner and other scholars of her era, and for some who proceeded her, telling the history of women entailed first getting women in the history books, to say that they were there (as thinkers and workers, etc., and not just as mothers and daughters and keepers of the home). Women's history became increasingly more sophisticated and richer as scholars dug deeper into the archives, for example Gerda Lerner's documentary history *Black Women in White America*, publishing documents about and from Black women.⁵ What she did then was to say in effect, "I get it, I see it. Black women have a different story, which is not always in line with the story of White women." On the question of patriarchy, she understood that it is not the same patriarchal story for all women. Gerda Lerner started out in one place and like any good historian, she ended up in a different place. Because we all end up in different places from the place where we start, because we have learned so much more. If we stayed where we were when we wrote our dissertations we could not do our best work. Gerda understood that, she evolved with the study of women.

3 Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage. The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, Cambridge 2008.

4 Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina. Rebels Against Slavery*, Boston 1967.

5 Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America. A Documentary History*, New York 1973.

Harders: That is why she became such an important figure for women's history in the United States, not only through her research and publications but also through her teaching and by founding a course on women's history at Sarah Lawrence College in 1972. She laid the groundwork to establish women's history as a degree programme. You mentioned that Gerda Lerner began to be more interested in class and race, too. How do you consider Gerda Lerner's role for women's and gender history? What topics did she bring to history as a field?

Glymph: Her role was foundational. There is no question that she played a central, foundational, pivotal role in women's history. She also played a vital role in the establishment of gender history. Even where her analytical language differs from that used by scholars today when thinking and writing about gender history, her work was always infused with an understanding of gender, an understanding that women's experience was different because of gender. I am thinking, for example, about her critical work on mill girls,⁶ which deals with the question of women, but also with labour and class. For some time now, there has been a growing interest in intersectionality, and scholars sometimes forget that Gerda was doing that too. She was not doing it in the way that we are doing it today, but the energy that we bring to work today is because she and others laid the foundation not only for women's history but also for gender history. There is no topic with which scholars of women's and gender history today are concerned that did not animate Gerda's work or thinking. It may have taken her a bit longer to get closer to where we are, but she had so much further to come because when she started the field was not even a field.

As we think about the founding of a field and the contributions that people made and where the field is today, we need to always remember the place from which those who founded the field started and how much basic work had to be done. We must have that basic work before we can do the theoretical and analytical work. The gender pathway exists because of the foundation in women's history and women's studies that Gerda was so critical in helping to establish. The work she did is just amazing when we consider that. Not only in terms of her published scholarship but also her work establishing the first university course in women's history, and founding and co-founding organizations that were critical to getting women's history recognized as a field. Not just women's history but also thinking Jewish women's history and African American women's history. Behind the scenes she was deeply engaged with the founding scholars of African American women's history, such as Darlene Clark Hine, helping to get that field established. She touched many areas of gender history. Some of those touches may not seem as big or important today, but with-

6 Gerda Lerner, *The Lady and the Mill Girl. Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson*, in: *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 10/1 (1969), 5–15.

out them we could not do the work that we are now doing. I certainly could not do the work that I am doing, had Gerda not done the work that she did and she could not do the work that I do when she started out because first there had to be Gerda's, there had to be scholars insisting first of all that women are important, and secondly, that you cannot have a history of anything without considering women and women's experiences. This had to be institutionalized in universities where women like Gerda had been discouraged from going on the job market with a field in women's history. Many of her male colleagues did not consider her study on the Grimké Sisters a serious field of inquiry.

Harders: You are right: we need founding figures like Gerda Lerner and other scholars and we need to remember them.

Concerning race: in Germany and Austria, history as a field and gender history are only slowly beginning to include race as a category of analysis. In our email conversation to prepare this interview you wrote about "the historically fraught relationship between women's and gender history and race" in the United States. Would you like to share something about your conversations with Gerda Lerner on this subject?

Glymph: Thinking about race and women and class, in my conversations with Gerda and in our written communications, there was never a time when I thought that Gerda Lerner did not understand the importance of race and class. I encountered her late in her academic career. Her first work about the Grimké Sisters is about White women, essentially. Nevertheless, there is something more to it because the Grimké Sisters were critical of the system of slavery. If Gerda were writing that book later in her life, it might be a different book in some respects.

My conversations with Gerda always gave me encouragement to do the work I was doing. Even when it sometimes seemed to her to be extraordinarily different, she listened, and she engaged my thinking. We were talking about *Out of the House of Bondage. The Transformation of the Plantation Household* and in talking about women in the plantation household, we were also talking about questions of labour and class. Gerda had a privileged life as a child before the Nazis took over, but she also knew something about work and class from personal experience. When she came to the US, she worked in all kinds of jobs. She was a labourer, she did all kinds of low paid work. She knew something about class also because she had been studying and thinking about it. She had not yet had the space, maybe because of her upbringing, to think so much of race, but as soon as she landed in New York, it was impossible not to think about race. In her fearlessness, her refusal to back down from difficult issues, she made a path not only for herself but for women in general as well as scholars. It is very difficult to imagine a woman who had been married for a couple of decades, who had children, entering a PhD programme at Columbia,

asking to work on a history of women. She would certainly not put it this way, but in her own way she was saying to me: “What you are doing is important, and it is not the work I did but it is the work needed now, it is the work that has to be done now.” And so, I valued her interventions. I valued the times when she said, “Explain that to me”, which made me think harder about the questions that I asked and the answers that I thought I was finding in the archive. I am at home in the archive and Gerda was at home in the archive. We remember this huge personality, we remember all the path setting books that she wrote, we remember the organizing that she did, from labour organizing to organizing in university, all the people she mentored. We sometimes forget, too often forget, that Gerda Lerner’s work was grounded in the archives. And that is something I really want my students to remember: that you cannot be a good historian unless you are committed to doing the research in the archive.

She said, and I tell my students and my friends this all the time today, there is no silence in the archive, there are silencers. And Gerda knew that the silencers had too often been historians. The record is in the archive, male scholars were just not interested in the record of women. They read the same papers, they went through the same records that Gerda went through, but they came away from their task, not seeing women. Or, I should rephrase that, they saw them, but they were largely uninterested. I still have the first, now lovingly tattered, copy I purchased of Gerda’s *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. It was the first time that I encountered many women whose names and stories are now familiar, though for reasons we do not want them to be famous, like Amy Spain and Margaret Garner, and I first thought seriously about work in the plantation household. There is much that we owe Gerda. I would be delighted to see more recognition of her thoughts about the archive. The programme in Vienna honouring her is wonderful and hopefully it will encourage more people to go back and read or re-read Gerda’s work.⁷

Harders: Gerda Lerner is remembered as a pioneer of women’s history in the United States and Europe, but her work is not cited much anymore. Her publications seem to have lost impact during the past decades and no longer attract much interest. More recently, however, I noticed that students are (again) interested in her book Creation of Patriarchy.⁸ Vera Kallenberg currently writes a biography of Gerda Lerner and discusses her work on race against the background of her own experiences as a persecu-

7 Inauguration ceremony of the *Gerda Lerner Lecture Hall* at the University of Vienna, 7 June 2022. For more information see: <https://medienportal.univie.ac.at/media/aktuelle-pressemeldungen/detailansicht/artikel/festakt-zur-eroeffnung-des-gerda-lerner-hoersaals-an-der-universitaet-wien> (29 September 2022).

8 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York 1986.

ted Jewish woman from Europe living in the US, placing Lerner's work in the context of intersectionality.⁹ I myself have started to look at her texts from a new perspective compared to the 1990s, when I studied history and first read her texts. What might be a way to reestablish Gerda Lerner in the curriculum, to make people re-read her or read her for the first time? Do we need to reframe her as a theoretically working historian, as someone who shaped theoretical approaches in thinking about women's and gender history or about history in general?

Glymph: That is a really great and important question or comment. Based on my reading, Gerda's work is not cited as much anymore as it was even two decades ago and that is unfortunate. That may have something to do with how we train students today. That too often we are just looking for the next bright shiny object and we forget what the luster in exciting new work owes to the mining and polishing of another generation, on the foundational work of scholars like Gerda. How often is her work assigned in our classes today? How often is it mandatory reading for field examinations in women's history or gender studies or US history? It is not only Gerda's work but so much of the foundational literature that is no longer taught. The result is evident in scholarship that purports to be new when it is not. I am recalling that in her autobiography, Gerda described herself as a feminist theoretician.¹⁰ But if you were to walk into any gender studies classroom today and ask students to describe Gerda Lerner, I doubt that anyone would say "feminist theoretician", or that her name would even be brought up. If it is, it might be mainly to associate her with an older branch of feminism, but not as someone whose work is relevant today. We must be more deliberate in ensuring that the work of women historians like Gerda Lerner is taught and recognized. Events like the one in Vienna will help to do that, but we need much more. One of the abiding concerns that I sensed in Gerda was that her work would be forgotten. Part of that concern came from her fear that as scholars turned to gender analysis, that "women's history" would be neglected. This, again, would be a huge mistake. We need Gerda's work, we need her way of thinking.

One place to start is to assign, for example, her autobiography which gives students a good sense of where she comes from. How did being Jewish influence or shape the historian that she became? She said it was critical, fundamental, to the historian that she became, even though she did not think about it that way initially.

⁹ Vera Kallenberg, *The Making of Women's Experience. Gerda Lerner in a Transnational Intellectual History Perspective* (work in progress). See also her recent publications on this topic: idem, *Neu gelesen. Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America*, New York (Pantheon Books) 1972, in: *WerkstattGeschichte* 86 (2022), 151–155; idem, *Intersektionale Genealogien von Intersektionalität: Europäisch-jüdische Erfahrung, African American Women's History und Gerda Lerner's Black Women in White America* (1972), in: *FZG – Freiburger Zeitschrift für Geschlechterstudien* 28 (2022), 1–19.

¹⁰ Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed. A Political Autobiography*, Philadelphia 2002.

I am a Southerner, I descended of enslaved people, I am very conscious of the fact that how I think is partly a result of my professional training as a historian but is also in part the result of what I have seen, what I have witnessed, what I know from the space of being a Black Southerner and a descendant of enslaved people and people who experienced Jim Crow and segregation. The history we write keeps changing. It keeps changing because we become smarter, individually and as a profession, as we grow in understanding historical change. What I have learned over decades has changed how I think about history and allows me to write the kind of history that my great-grandmother, for example, would not have been able to. Even had she possessed a PhD, which she did not, she would not have had access to the archives that I have access to, but there are other important reasons as well for why she would not have been able to do the work that I do.

Harders: The professions shape us, topics that seem to be relevant today shape us, but also our own history, our family's history shapes what we are doing. As you said earlier, the connection to other scholars, like your relation to Gerda Lerner, shapes our thinking, how we frame questions and how we answer them. It often seems that it is either a theoretical perspective or the historical record shaping our books. But we all know – as women's history and gender history have taught us – that the personal experience is also reflected in historian's lives and work.

Glymph: In one of your texts, you talk about how important it has been to you to not only photograph the documents that you find in the archive but also to photograph the building in which you find them.¹¹ I have often said and written that I cannot write well about a place that I have not visited. I need to walk the ground. When I am in the archive, I take pictures of documents and the boxes that hold them, but unlike you, I have not photographed the buildings that hold the archives in any purposeful way. I may start doing this because I find that idea fascinating and as well, the question of what this can do for us as historians. I can see its potential in documenting, for example, how I enter this archive differently from the way in which historians, predominantly male historians, entered it in the distant and sometimes not so distant past. I try to imagine what it was like for Gerda, entering the archive, trying to write a book about two White women from the South who became abolitionists. We have stories of the difficulties historians like John Hope Franklin had accessing archival spaces and I want to think about what that meant for Gerda, to engage students in thinking not only about the foundational significance of her scholarship but the circumstances under which she had to produce this work. So, I

11 Levke Harders, Social Media as a Distinct Form of Knowledge Production, in: History of Knowledge (2020); <https://historyofknowledge.net/2020/09/16/social-media> (29 September 2022).

want to thank you for that insight which led me to thinking differently about Gerda and the value of her presence in our profession.

Harders: The naming of the Gerda Lerner Lecture Hall at the University of Vienna is crucial because spaces and names, memory and memory politics, have an effect on learning, teaching, thinking. Therefore, symbols and signs like the Gerda Lerner Lecture Hall are highly relevant. The history of knowledge usually is a White and male-dominated history as it is also told by the buildings, by portraits decorating these buildings, by names on lecture halls. Stating that the Gerda Lerner Lecture Hall is Vienna university's lecture hall number 41, one colleague asked on Twitter: "Couldn't the other 40 [lecture halls] (and those after 41) be named after women?"¹² We surely would have no problems finding enough interesting women historians or important female scholars.

Glymph: I think you are right. Especially today and for the last two years during which we have talked more about monuments erected to White supremacy. Having this lecture hall named for Gerda Lerner is really wonderful. However, when students enter the lecture hall named the *Gerda Lerner Lecture Hall*, how will they know what it means? The work of naming and renaming is important, but then following that up, to ensure that name means something to the students who enter the lecture hall, that they know immediately that they are in a space named after a person who made immense contributions to history, is no less important. There are very few people of Gerda's stature who did as much as she. We can name historians who wrote as many and more books, but how many simultaneously did organizing work not only in the institutions where they worked, but outside of those institutions to make them more open to students, scholars, and the larger public? Her combination of scholarship and activist work is rare. I continue to be amazed at how much she accomplished. I cannot think of anyone like Gerda Lerner in this regard.

Harders: I agree, this close interaction between scholarship and activism is an important feature of her life, probably influencing her professional life and academic interests and the way she was teaching.

Glymph: I think about how we can reintroduce Gerda Lerner not only to young scholars but also to the wider public. Many wonderful young scholars today believe, like Gerda, that their work should be assessable to larger publics beyond the ivory tower; that the work of the academy must connect to and be of value to the communities in which they live and study. And it is important to remind them of people like Gerda who were doing this kind of work decades ago. Again, thinking of

12 Susanne Wosnitzka on 27 May 2022, <https://twitter.com/Donauschwalbe/status/1530143506865524737?s=20&t=OH4D4S8ycbHuDtMs6-qONA> (29 September 2022).

Gerda's influence on my work on household work as labour and the plantation house as a political space, Gerda and scholars like Elsa Barkley Brown and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese helped me to think about the explicit connection, about the many kinds of spaces that are inherently political. A political space can be a kitchen; it can be the cabin of enslaved people; it can be a pathway where people meet and gather. We must be more intentional in recognizing Gerda's contributions. She helped us understand that we need not follow traditional periodization nor conceptions of what a political space looks like.

Harders: Thank you for this statement that we need to study all people who were active, even if in other spaces than traditionally focused on by political history. You mentioned earlier how the conversation with Gerda Lerner influenced your book Out of the House of Bondage. I would like to add a question on your recent work The Women's Fight. In your study, you look at women's roles in the Civil War, bringing to light the contributions of enslaved women. You also offer a methodological approach to research race, class, and gender in the historical material. Why do we need (or: do we need) new perspectives and methods to write what Lerner called a 'holistic approach' to history?¹³

Glymph: My work and my most recent book, *The Women's Fight*, in particular, owes much to the tremendous literature on the Civil War that has been published over the past two decades, much of it by women historians. Thinking about women in the Civil War, one of the central questions before me was this: "Why do we not think more about how women interacted with each other?", which is a question that Gerda certainly entertained. Much has been written about White Southern women and separately about White Northern women, about labouring women and enslaved women, and separately about middle class women, when the world does not work that way and women's lives were not lived that way. For me, thinking about women's interactions across lines of race and class made sense as did re-thinking the meaning of spaces that men have historically designated as battlefields and home fronts. Well, home fronts in most wars are often also battlefields. This was always foremost in my mind, and it goes back to Gerda's influence in insisting that how we frame things and the language we use are important. This distinction between the home front and the battlefield seemed to me to be a distinction that had sometimes led us astray. It made it harder to see women, women thinking about war, women planning for war, women working for or against war, and the particular political perspectives of different women based on their race and class. In *The Women's Fight*, I am leaning

13 Gerda Lerner/Albert Müller, Frauengeschichte, 'lange Geschichte' und ein paar andere Probleme. Ein Gespräch zwischen Gerda Lerner und Albert Müller, in: Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften 6/2 (1995), 285–294, 289.

on scholars who have paved the way for me, including Gerda, and made it possible for me to think about women and war in a different way. Her work on working-class women allowed me to think creatively about working-class women and poor women in the North and South during the Civil War. The methodology that I use is nothing new, I am just insisting in my work that when we go to the archive, we go not with an answer, but a question. In reading the archival resources or documents, that question is answered, or it is not. Even when it is not, in the process of research we may find new compelling questions. I had questions when I went to the archive but at almost every turn those questions got mashed up or rejected because the archive was telling me something different. When I went into the archive for *Out of the House of Bondage* I had in mind a book about slavery, but what I found in the archive did not match what I found in the historiography so that project changed. The archives told a different story.

I said this earlier, and I repeat here, the archive is never silent. It has a booming voice and includes voices of people that we think are not there. They may not be there in the way that we want them to be. For example, I wish there were more letters written by enslaved women. But while there are not nearly as many as I would like to have, I can read what slaveholders wrote about them, and they wrote incessantly about them. They never imagined that what they wrote about enslaved women would someday find its way into the work of historians. We must stop saying that we cannot find enslaved people because they are silent in the archive, or they have been silenced. To be sure, their voices have been silenced and they are not present in the way we want them to be. But if we stop and think about what is there, we realize that we have more to work with than we think. And war, from ancient times to today, generates tremendous amounts of archival material, probably more than any other kind of political event. So, scholars like me who study the Civil War have an abundance of material.

Harders: In your book, you search for different people in the historical material, for different voices. In my opinion, this is an approach that women's history has brought to history as a field. Women's and gender history, Black history and African American history use this perspective of looking at the existing sources to find different voices in this material.

Glymph: I think this is exactly right, this is traditional women's history in large measure. When I find a record of a wealthy White woman referring to a poor White woman as trash or dirt, I do not need a gender perspective to analyse this, because that is just basic history and, in this case, it is women's history. Just as we go to the archive with questions, we write from the archive with the understanding that theory helps us understand what we are seeing, that it informs the story in important ways.

I benefit immensely from scholars who are thinking about theory and political perspectives. Still, while I use, benefit from, and cite theorists, I do not want theory to be the thing that is leading me. That I want to be the archive. Then I can use the theory to help make sense of what I find.

Harders: I appreciate that these theoretical perspectives can be found in your book – thank you! In your latest book, you reflect on the fact that Black women were mostly left out of Civil War historiography so far. I would like to relate this to Gerda Lerner’s statement that we need more comprehensive stories:¹⁴ Why is it necessary to change this White and male-dominated history by telling more complex and more comprehensive stories?

Glymph: We need more complex, nuanced histories. A history, for example, of the Civil War that is just a battlefield-focused history or an officer-focused history, or a history focused on the soldiers who fought is an incomplete history. To fully understand why they fought, we need the history of noncombatants and combatants not formally recognized, of those people who fought but not in uniform. Without this more complex history, we come away with the old story of the Civil War as a war between the North and the South, a military contest in which women and enslaved people played less than consequential roles, in which women’s stories get lost or submerged when we tell the story of Sherman’s march from Atlanta or Gettysburg, or of any number of other battles. But whether it was formally demarcated as such with mapped lines of battle or an informal one like the home front, women were present on battlefields. Women cooked, did laundry, and voiced their opinions about the war, which could differ depending on their race and class. For Black women getting to the battlefield was crucial because this space held out the potential of getting to a safe space, a space of freedom. Gerda was right that you cannot write history without women. My work also insists that we cannot do Civil War history without them.

Going back to the previous point on the archive: enslaved women did not just run away from slavery and go to the Union camps. By running away and entering Union camps, they forced military commanders, soldiers, Lincoln, and Congress to recognize them. They said, in effect: “we are here, look at us, we are not going back”. By refusing to go back even when conditions in Union lines were horrible, they forced commanders to take notice and to leave a record of their presence and their politics. There is a story which I have told several times because it exemplifies this point, the story of a young girl about ten years old. Harriet Tubman is famous for the raid on the Combahee River that carried hundreds of enslaved people to freedom but not everyone who tried to go with her made it. Among them was this young girl.

¹⁴ Ibid.

As she ran toward the Union gunboats, an overseer ordered her to stop. She refused and he shot her leaving her unable to make it to the ships that carried the others to Union lines on the South Carolina coast, but that child stays with me. Her story is important. Her refusal is what led to her presence in the archive. A Confederate commander recorded her story. Gerda helped prepare me to see her in the archive.

Harders: Yes, this is the history of society and of the societies we live in today. It is not only women's or gender history, it is history, our history, your history, it is our society's history. It is important to tell stories like the one of the wounded girl for two reasons. Firstly, I think that historians need to reflect on what has not been told, what usually has been concealed for such a long time. Secondly, we should remember that much of this history, much of women's history, much of Black women's history, most of Black women's history probably, was a history of violence.

Glymph: The violence is endemic to this history. Yet, one of the things I am trying to do, and I think more and more scholars are as well, is to consider what it means to understand that no people can live any kind of meaningful life when there is just violence. Enslaved women who ran away during the Civil War built communities amid violence? To take that question to any period of history, not only in US history but in world history: what kinds of lives did peasant women build even when they were circumscribed in so many other aspects of their lives? How do people find joy amid pain? Because it is that joy that helps us to keep going. The history that I am concerned with is largely a history of a society, it is about people fighting injustice. Slavery was an injustice. Women fought many kinds of injustices. We owe an incredible debt to Gerda Lerner and the women she trained who went on to do gendered analyses of different questions – and those of us who she did not directly train but who through her work became her students.

Harders: Thank you so much, Thavolia Glymph, for sharing your memories of Gerda Lerner and your thoughts on history.