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Makers: Women Who Make America [film review]

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MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA, produced by Kunhardt McGee Productions, Barak Goodman, and Pamela mason Wagner, Storyville Films, and WETA, 2013. (<http://www.pbs.org/makers>)

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The three-hour documentary MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MADE AMERICA, promises to tell “how women have helped shape America over the last fifty years...in pursuit of their rights to a full and fair share of political power, economic opportunity, and personal autonomy.” However, rather than provide a historical analysis of the reemergence of feminism as produced by social movements and social change, MAKERS, according to the film’s press release, focuses on “unforgettable moments in history” told through stories of “exceptional women whose pioneering contributions continue to shape the world in which we live... stories of women who led the fight, those who opposed it, and those-- both famous and unfamous -- who were caught in its wake.”¹ There may be much to praise in MAKERS as television, but it offers very little as a historical teaching resource at the college or high school level.

The documentary is one part of what the producers call an “unprecedented multi-platform video experience from PBS and AOL,” including over 1,000 short videos of “remarkable stories of groundbreaking women,” available on the (advertising-supported) website, makers.com. The producer Dyllan McGee initially approached Gloria Steinem to propose a film about Steinem’s life, but her response that her life was “part of a collective of stories” redirected McGee’s efforts toward multiple interviewees. Interviews originally scheduled for up to two hours were pared down to short clips, from thirty seconds to four minutes each, a decision made to serve “the way video is being consumed on line.”² The filmmakers built the documentary from these short clips, arguing that this gave their film a less “top-down” approach and a broader focus than a conventional documentary; “what we were able to do is to find the common threads and themes in the stories and then build the narrative out of these moments.”³

¹ Press release for MAKERS, February, 2013, from Kate Kelly, Director of National Publicity, WETA

² Dru Sefton, “‘Collective of Stories’ of Women’s Movement,” *Currents-For People in Public Media* (American university), 10/9.2012, , <http://www.current.org/2012/10/collective-of-stories-of-womens-movement/> accessed 8/11/2013; Chris Marlowe, “AOL and PBS Unveil cross-platform ‘Makers,’” *Digital Media Wire*, 2/28/2012, <http://www.dmwmedia.com/news/2012/02/28/aol-and-pbs-unveil-cross-platform-makers-with-video>, accessed 8/8/2013

³ McGee quoted in Lily Rothman, “A New PBS Documentary Tells the Story of One Revolution (and Begins Another), 2/26/2013,

But putting together a television narrative out of individual stories does not necessarily create a historical resource meriting precious classroom time. Individual stories highlight individual consciousness and personal trajectory, rather than institutional-level analysis. The sociologist Francesca Polletta found that individual accounts from 1960s civil rights sit-in participants emphasized spontaneity and minimized the role of civil rights organizations, teachers, and churches, in contrast to research documenting how sit-ins drew on precedents, and were well-planned and executed.⁴ Memory is imperfect, and changes over time. Retrospective accounts differ from those collected in the heat of the moment. A narrative created from the “common threads and themes” in stories collected in the past few years runs the danger of relying too heavily on personal accounts invariably inflected by the popularly circulating media spin that can become entwined with individual recall.

Journalistic notions of balanced coverage shaped the producers’ criteria for who to interview on camera. After seeking suggestions from their board of advisors to identify noteworthy individuals, the producers chose interviewees according to particular categories, reporting that the women featured “were diverse on all levels, such as age, race, perspective on the women’s movement, and profession.”⁵ They used recognizable icons and emphasized their highest achieved status or self-identified political affiliation: business CEOs Meg Whitman of Hewlett Packard, Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, Marissa Mayer of Yahoo; comedian Ellen DeGeneres; “media mogul and philanthropist” Oprah Winfrey; “former secretary of state” Hillary Rodham Clinton; pop singer Madonna; congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton; former and current Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg; tennis star Billy Jean King; and the feminist and conservative activists Gloria Steinem and Phyllis Schlafly. Interviewees also include lesser-known women who challenged gender discrimination or opposed feminism: the first woman to run the Boston marathon; a woman telephone worker who mounted a legal challenge against Southern Bell after her application for a better- paid switchman’s job was turned down; a Connecticut wife who successfully sued the police for not arresting her battering husband; a southern coal miner who won her case against her boss for sexual harassment; the director of a North Dakota women’s health clinic including abortion services, and a local pro-life activist who tried to shut the clinic down, picketing for more than ten years.

The documentary may satisfy an inherent fascination in attaching faces to famous names, and in hearing from pioneer boundary crossers, but it offers viewers no context for interpreting informants’ accomplishments and challenges as either ordinary or exceptional. Narrators make broad claims based on personal

<http://entertainment.time.com/2013/02/26/a-new-pbs-documentary-tells...ne-revolution-and-begins-another-plus-an-exclusive-video-clip/> accessed 8/8/2013.

⁴ Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (University of Chicago press, 2006).

⁵ McGee quoted in Sefton, “‘Collective of Stories,’”

experience or the sharing in consciousness-raising groups which may well have not crossed class or race lines: for example, “everyone read *The Feminine Mystique*,” “everyone had mothers who oppressed them.” At best, the *Makers* interviews can serve historians as primary sources; however, to understand what they collectively can tell us about how women shaped America and fought for (and against) women’s equality, viewers need to know much more about narrators’ positioning, social, economic, and political. The resurgence of feminism in the 1960s occurred during a period of relatively widespread economic opportunity; the battles over feminism since the late 1970s have unfolded amidst the narrowing of economic opportunity and the expansion of economic inequality.

Makers includes interviews with scholars who have written or edited important and illuminating books on women’s lives and protest between 1960 and the present: sociologists Stephanie Coontz and Arlie Hochschild, historians Sara Evans and Ruth Rosen, Barbara Smith, Susan Douglas, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, identified respectively as a “publisher,” “author,” and “professor.”⁶ But the filmmakers did not necessarily draw information from these intellectuals’ areas of expertise, and they used only very short clips from the scholars’ conversations, with sometimes only a sentence or two serving to fill in background between interviews. Their segments consist of sound bites, rather than analytic insights that could offer viewers new ways to understand the dramatic social changes the interviewees describe.

The underutilization of scholarly voices is all the more glaring because without them, the story line carried by Meryl Streep’s vice-over, consists mostly of sweeping generalizations and media truisms rather than charting the multiple origins of the critiques of women’s inequality emerging in the 1960s as revealed in new scholarly research. The “origins” story is heavily weighted toward the discontent of married middle class women crystallized by reading Betty Friedan’s 1963 best-seller, *The Feminine Mystique*. The documentary presents Betty Friedan as a part-time

⁶ For a sampling of their books, see Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992) and *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the Sixties* (Basic, 2011); Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (Viking, 1989, 1997, rev. 2012); Evans, *Personal Politics: the Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (Knopf, 1979) and *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (Free Press, 2003); Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (Penguin, 200, rev. 2006); Barbara Smith with Gloria Hull and Patricia Bell Scott, ed., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave : Black Women’s Studies* (Feminist Press, 1982) and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Kitchen Table Press, 1983); Susan Douglas with Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: the Idealization of Motherhood and How It has Undermined All Women* (Free Press, 2005) and *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Myth that Feminism’s Work is Done* (Times Books, 2010); (Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New Press, 1995)

journalist who interviewed her Smith classmates to write her book. The film glosses over Friedan's exposure to labor feminism stretching back to 1943, and her authorship of pamphlet about the exploitation of working women, "UE Fights for Women Workers," in 1952. Labor feminists had raised concerns about sex discrimination and women's unpaid work in the home in the 1940s and 1950s. A fuller account of "origins" could acknowledge the 1940s black feminist thought that laid the groundwork for recognizing black women's family and communal efforts as resistance to injustice, and the path-breaking theorizing on racial and gender discrimination by African American lawyer and civil rights activist Pauli Murray central to the founding of NOW and the formulation of its legal strategy.⁷ In later sections, the film's narrative claims that feminism was a catalyst for rising divorce rates in the 1970s, that birth control pills shook up marriage, that publicity related to Sherri Finkbine's 1962 abortion "forced the abortion issue," assume simple causalities and clearly marked turning points for uneven social changes driven by multiple causes.

The visual aspect of *Makers* draws on archival film and videotape, as well as available home movies and old photographs to fill in the "then" to accompany the "now" provided by the interviewees. (Relying so heavily on interviewees who made news increases the possibility of accessing this kind of material.) The filmmakers also searched for visual material to show discrimination and protest as it occurred. Sometimes they hit the jackpot, as with the footage of an enraged marathon official literally trying to push the aspiring woman runner Katherine Switzer out of the 1967 race, and the over-the-top footage of Bobby Riggs' performance of male superiority in his 1972 orchestrated "battle of the sexes" tennis match-up with Billy Jean King. The footage from "inside" the 1968 Miss America pageant is juxtaposed to the radical feminist theater taking place outside: crowning a sheep and throwing brooms, dustpans, curlers, and girdles into a "Freedom Trash can." Feminists' inventiveness is also on display in a "Whistle In" demonstration turning the tables on male groping and catcalling on Wall Street, and in the carefully orchestrated 1970 sit-in in the editor's office of the Ladies' Home Journal, resulting in control over content of eight pages in a coming issue. Television footage of prime time newscasters Harry Reasoner and Eric Sevareid trivializing "women's lib" provides another powerful form of documentation.

The use of advertising images and television shows as transparent representations of sensibility and time periods is more problematic in *Makers*. The creative personnel responsible for television advertisements used various filmic techniques to associate their products with dreaming rather than daily life. The use of a clip

⁷ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War, and American Feminism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, 2004); Serena Mayeri, *Reasoning From Race: Feminism, Law, and the Civil Rights Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

from Jackie Gleason's working-class class burlesque in "the Honeymooners" to exemplify social norms tolerating violence against women, and a clip of Archie Bunker claiming patriarchal prerogative to illustrate a pendulum swing against the women's movement is simplistic shorthand, literalizing television fictions.

Even with three hours, *Makers* cannot deliver on its promise as history, whatever its pleasures as television. As an alternative, historians looking for visual primary sources for teaching the struggle for women's equality might turn to activist-created films created at the time by women's movement activists, such as *The Women's Film* (1971) and *Janie's Janie*. (1972). They could also use two new documentaries on the Boston area women's movement (on which I consulted): *A Moment in Her Story: Stories from the Boston Women's Movement* (2012) and *Left on Pearl*, the soon to be completed (2014?) history of the 1971 women's Harvard building occupation that resulted in a city-wide women's center in Cambridge, MA. Using a local framing, these documentaries shift the focus to collective aspirations rather than individual achievement to convey the unfinished promise of women's liberation.

“that’s what it [getting married] was about—the ring, the silver pattern the China;”
commercial dreamscapes featuring consumption as alternat to daily life
The National Welfare Rights organization added welfare to the list of women’s
issues in the 1960s; Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights Moment*
(University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).