

A Work in Progress

Nancy F. Cott

Feminisms:

A Global History

by Lucy Delap.
University of Chicago Press,
394 pp., \$27.50

For the Many:

American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality

by Dorothy Sue Cobble.
Princeton University Press,
572 pp., \$35.00

Has the meaning of feminism ever been more jumbled than it is today? Any woman speaking up or talking back, whether about work, sex, criticism, culture, or politics, attracts the label “feminist.” Critics nonetheless equate the word with man-hating, with racism, with bourgeois careerism, with child-hating, even with the utter destruction of gender categories. A conservative pundit recently damned Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s erotic music video “WAP” for being exactly what feminism had, all along, filthily promised.¹

Use and abuse of “feminism” are bound to continue: the word’s meaning has always provoked dispute. It was a new coinage in the early 1900s, when a radical minority of American suffragists adopted it as more capacious than “suffragism,” since their aspirations were broader than acquiring equal citizenship. They envisioned gaining sexual freedom, throwing open women’s access to employment, and upending expectations for family life. This new feminism scorned nineteenth-century women’s rights advocates’ adherence to conventional respectability and instead adopted the free-ranging spirit of rebellion of the 1910s in Greenwich Village, where many of its early adherents lived.

Feminism was “something so new that it isn’t in the dictionaries yet,” the writer Edna Kenton enthused in 1913, cheering its intent “to alter radically the mental attitudes of men and women.” Even staid Carrie Chapman Catt, soon to serve as president of the largest American suffrage organization, called feminism a “worldwide revolt against all artificial barriers which laws and customs interpose between women and human freedom.” In short order the vamp star of the silent screen, Theda Bara, declared, “I am in effect a feminist.” Women’s associations or publications as far-flung as Chile, Hungary, Uruguay, Argentina, and the Philippines used words with the same root by 1904 and 1905. A decade later the Missouri Anti-Suffrage League warned candidates for office that “feminism advocates nonmotherhood, free love, easy divorce, economic independence for all women, and other demoralizing and destructive theories.”

The word has played maid of all work ever since. And perhaps that is as



Yumi Doi, an activist with Group of Fighting Women, at a protest against sexual discrimination, Tokyo, June 1972

it should be. The meaning of feminism cannot remain single or static, since women’s demands respond to their own particular circumstances. Although related claims for basic rights—political voice, dignified work, education, and respect—have recurred repeatedly over three centuries, saying so barely hints at the rich panoply of feminist emphases and methods. If any definition can be effective, it has to allow variable application—as in the historian Linda Gordon’s helpful description of feminism as “a critique of male supremacy, formed and offered in the light of a will to change it, which in turn assumes a conviction that it is changeable.”²

Lucy Delap’s *Feminisms: A Global History* revives questions about feminism past and present. Delap, a historian at Cambridge, explores three centuries of women’s grandly diverse schemes and copes with the breadth of her subject in an unexpected way. She offers no stock chronology, no charting of organizations or nations or regions or types. Instead, each chapter springs from a single word—*dreams, ideas, spaces, objects, looks, feelings, actions, songs*. The myriad feminist impulses crowding Delap’s chapters compose a journey through time and space more circular than linear—a carousel ride in which the ups and downs are as much a part of the trip as the forward movement.

“Dreams” considers Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopian science-fiction novel *Herland* (1915), where contented women live celibately and reproduce by parthenogenesis (having killed off the men in ancient times), as well as the Bolshevik revolutionary Alexan-

²Linda Gordon, “What’s New in Women’s History,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis (Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 29.

dra Kollontai’s fictional portrayals of heterosexual passion ranging freely in a society ruled by workers. But Delap gives pride of place to a 1905 utopian novel by the Bengali writer and activist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream* (written and published in English), where women rule, their education flourishes in a garden setting, and purdah is absent though Muslim sacred beliefs are maintained. Delap includes just one “actualization” of a dream, in the Brahmin reformer Pandita Ramabai’s late-nineteenth-century establishment of a women’s society and widows’ home in the Indian state of Maharashtra—part of her social program, much of which centered on women’s education.

Delap hits some predictable targets but more often strays. “Spaces,” for example, first notes Mary Wollstonecraft and the philosopher William Godwin maintaining separate living quarters in their “marriage under two roofs,” and then points to the short life of the Peruvian-French writer and political radical Flora Tristan (1803–1844), who kept her own Paris apartment and held a salon there, only to be stalked and shot (not fatally) by the husband she had abandoned. Delap notes Virginia Woolf’s insistence on “a room of one’s own” but gives more attention to Raichō Hiratsuka (1886–1971), describing how she founded a feminist group in 1911 and housed its magazine, *Seitō* (Bluestocking), in an office space in her home in Tokyo.

To illustrate feminist claims on “spaces of labor,” she turns to women working as small-scale traders in local markets in British-ruled Nigeria and their defiance of the limits placed on them. “Contestation of space has been central to feminism,” Delap believes. The Nigerian market women, restive under their local and imperial overlords in the 1920s, used traditional gestures of insult such as unseemly nakedness to shame British-appointed

male market chiefs for their highhandedness and to act out against excessive imperial taxation. If these actions were not conventionally “feminist,” they amounted to simultaneous anticolonial resistance and advancement of the women’s livelihoods for their families’ sustenance.³ The market women inspired the Nigerian pan-Africanist Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a notable anticolonialist, socialist, and women’s rights advocate, who showed her admiration by dressing in their characteristic print-wrapper clothing.

Delap looks for influences that travel from the periphery to the metropolis as much as vice versa, finding British imperial locations as worthwhile to investigate as England itself. From local African markets she leaps to women-run businesses, women’s centers, and feminist bookstores of the 1970s and 1980s, highlighting

one in Bangalore called Streelekha, which not only sold books off the shelf but sent them by mail-order to buyers in the Global South, and offered meeting rooms and counseling resources as well. Delap thus “provincializes” Britain (and Europe and the United States). Her book opens not with Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as might be expected, but with an anonymous letter speaking for “We Ladies of Africa,” published in a newspaper in the British-ruled Gold Coast in 1886. The letter-writer denounces white male justice, which she sarcastically terms “Just-Ass,” for treating African women as its “foot-ball.”

Delap’s narrative lingers on small-scale outbursts such as that one and larger movements led by brave individuals in the Global South, China, and Japan, offering fascinating snapshots from an astonishing archive of academic studies. When she turns to violent actions by feminists, the stone-throwing suffragists in Britain get their due, but she dwells more on anarchist-inspired agitation by Chinese feminists during the first Nationalist revolutionary government of 1912. One was Tang Qunying (1871–1937), who physically attacked the Nationalist leader Song Jiaoren at a party conference for betraying women’s demands. She walked directly to his seat, “quickly raised her hands, scratched his forehead, twisted his beard, and boxed Song’s ears with her delicate hands,” a newspaper reported. “The sound was so loud that everyone could hear the echo.” Likewise, when Delap surveys women’s

³Temma Kaplan helpfully distinguished the “female consciousness” of such actions from “feminist consciousness,” while also linking the two forms, in “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918,” *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1982).

Michiko Matsumoto/Women’s Action Network

ways of expressing resistance to the status quo via their looks, she considers at length the complex politics of religion, anticolonialism, nationalism, and self-possession involved in women's wearing or not wearing the veil in Egypt, Lebanon, Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan.

Delap's examples from the US, Europe, and Britain often highlight grassroots undertakings by poor and seemingly powerless women, such as her long sketch of Violet Johnson (1870–1939). A Black Baptist lay leader in New Jersey who supported herself as a domestic servant, Johnson founded her own Baptist church in the early twentieth century in a laundry space she rented, helped by a small klatch of Black women friends. Successful in recruiting white donors, she then faced a tug-of-war when they began to tell her what to do. By 1918 she had an apartment and made it a home for newly minted female Black industrial workers. The local YWCA, which did not include Blacks in its outreach to women in industry, gave her some financial aid.

Like the actions of the Nigerian market women, Johnson's accomplishments would rarely be included in a standard feminist history, but Delap puts her there, for her lifelong commitment to creating comfortable gathering places for Black women, especially those who were devout. "Despite long-standing claims that religion is necessarily patriarchal," she comments (confirming her leniency in definition), "feminism has never been a uniquely secular movement when viewed in global perspective."

Each chapter finds its own path geographically and temporally—composing a pageant that runs from the speculum to the hijab, from the German League for the Protection of Motherhood to Radicalesbians, from breaking windows to singing, from bloomers to zines. Delap is not only applauding, however. She means to write a critical history, and assesses the gains and disadvantages of various methods and strategies, quite aware that projects of feminist intent do not ipso facto vanquish inequalities imposed by class, race, colonialism, or citizenship status. Some women's dreams are nightmares for others.

One illustration she offers is the story of a halfway house in Victoria, Australia, founded during the 1970s to allow women to escape male violence at home. It included Aboriginal as well as white and ethnically different immigrant women; residents were expected to share everyday life and set up house policies. The Australian state allotted funding for such refugees as early as 1975, and while an immediate benefit, state aid brought tensions among the residents to the fore. Educated white women were better equipped to negotiate state aid, while Aboriginal women were deeply distrustful of it and therefore of the white women's intentions, because of the history of state expropriation from and colonization of Aboriginal populations.

Discomfort, complaints, and arguments followed. Not only indigent women but also immigrants who wanted to enter the refuge felt attacked by white feminists' (perhaps unwitting) stereotyping of them, despite the whites' maintaining a veneer of anti-racism. Delap examines several such sobering incidents to encourage con-

temporary and future feminists to be wary of repeating past mistakes.

The chapter on feelings of course includes anger, highlighting Mitsu Tanaka, prominent in the women's liberation movement in Tokyo, whose fury at men's everyday sense of entitlement to use women's bodies as sexual receptacles drove her to write her 1970 manifesto, "Liberation from the Toilet." A sexual abuse survivor, Tanaka expressed the fierce wrath of "a womb that thinks for itself, that screams and stamps its revenge in the blood of its own child." Influenced, too, by the Black Power movement's mantra "Black is Beautiful" and by the sexually emancipatory ideas of Wilhelm Reich, Tanaka wanted to refigure the abject status of the *onna* (slut) and declare her beautiful.



Maida Springer Kemp, circa 1950

Anger among women also appears in this chapter, including Audre Lorde's expression of Black women's anger at white women for failing to see their own racism, lesbians' anger at straight women for making them invisible at the 1970 Congress to Unite Women, and flare-ups between "first world" and "third world" women at the Mexico City World Conference on Women in 1975. The chapter also includes love as a motive, as in the Black feminism of the writer Anna Julia Cooper and the poet June Jordan, and maternal devotion too, found in the Swedish reformer Ellen Key's radical advocacy in the 1910s for state support for unwed motherhood, as well as the political work of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, whose relatives were "disappeared" during the Dirty War in the 1970s.

"By no means are all the figures discussed in this book feminists," Delap concedes unapologetically; "many would not have heard of this word, and some would angrily repudiate it. But they can nonetheless be placed within a critical feminist history." Who will turn up where and doing what in Delap's book is as unknowable as where a roulette ball will stop.

Dorothy Sue Cobble in *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* diverges sharply from Delap's approach. Cobble's book proceeds chronologically, pursuing one strand of American women's international reform efforts in the

twentieth century. She means to convince readers of the preeminence of the women she groups together (who virtually all began as labor movement leaders) because of their ideological slant and dual goals. They combined dedication to social justice for "the many"—that is, working-class men and women—with additional focus on women's gender-based needs. That meant they strove to insert labor equity and social welfare regulations for all workers in international standard-setting agreements, and also special protections for women. They likewise argued for adequate female representation in policy-making bodies.

Cobble has written before about twentieth-century American female labor leaders and what she sees as their distinctive contributions to feminism, emphasizing their commitment to lessening sex discrimination while advancing overall workplace justice. In her book *The Other Women's Movement* (2004), she named them "labor feminists" who sought "more than sex equality," and then switched to "social justice feminists" in a 2014 essay in *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*. In *For the Many* she calls them "full rights feminists," positioning them no longer as the "other" women's movement but as the most significant one at the international level. (Though her subtitle announces a "global fight," individual nations are very present; committees composed of national representatives hammered out the standards these women sought, and nations had to ratify them to give them any impact.)

While Cobble makes their allegiance to regulation of labor "for the many" paramount, she adds "social democratic internationalism" to their agendas. Political clashes over different governments' methods arose once Communist and fascist nations joined the international bodies where Americans were also advocates—principally committees of the League of Nations, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the United Nations—and full rights feminists defended what they understood as democratic ways. Cobble's massive research in their personal papers and in international organizations' records enables her to discuss myriad details of their endeavors.

Cobble's appreciation for the integrity of the full rights feminists' line of reasoning and their persistence shapes her book. Their momentum was hampered by the very fact of their dual priorities, which often set them at odds with the male-dominated American labor movement, and also, continually, with feminists of another stripe. Labor union men did not put women's needs high among their priorities at home or abroad, to say the least. When Cobble's group pressed for maternity leave or other benefits specific to women, for instance, male unionists balked. On the other hand, avowedly feminist "equal rights" groups (before recent times) rarely considered labor injustice or social inequality their major concerns—or maternity either, because gender-specific requirements might make employers hesitate to hire women. By naming her group "full rights feminists," Cobble means to insist that they were indeed feminists (unlike male labor leaders), and to stress their divergence from (and, she

clearly believes, superiority to) feminists who lacked similar dedication to social justice for all workers.

Quite a few American women's groups operated internationally, but Cobble pays little heed to them, taking in the international scene through the eyes of her chosen subjects, who are, for the first third of the book, leaders in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). The WTUL was founded in the United States in 1903 to unite working women and middle-class "allies" in fostering unionization and legislation to benefit employed women. Its leaders joined in the fervor for international conferences and organization-building following World War I, and soon brought their dual agenda to the newly founded ILO. Cobble reveals their interactions with women from other countries whose collaboration they sought (sometimes creating steady friendships). Women from Britain, Canada, and Scandinavia most often cooperated, but the Americans also tried to make common cause with Latin American and Asian feminists.

In the 1920s the meaning of "equal rights" between women and men became a source of struggle in the ILO and related organizations. The position of WTUL leaders on the issue grew from a conflict at home with the National Woman's Party (NWP)—previously a hardy minority of bold suffragists—over its Equal Rights Amendment, which arrived on the floor of Congress in 1923, proposing, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction." (This same ERA, with its wording changed to mimic the Fifteenth Amendment, was passed by an overwhelming majority in Congress in 1971 but was not ratified by the required three quarters of the states before the allotted time expired.)

Politically active women—voters as of 1920—split over the idea. Most of them opposed the ERA. They worried that constitutionalizing "equal rights" would prohibit any legislation addressing women's particular needs—maternity benefits, for example. The ERA did not define how "equal rights" were to be implemented; its application in specific areas was left to interpretation. That is its glory or its fatal flaw, depending on one's point of view.

WTUL leaders and many other women opposed the ERA mainly because they thought it would kill state labor laws restricting hours and setting conditions for women at work, achieved through years of political effort. In 1908 the Supreme Court let such laws stand, because of society's interest in women's "maternal function." But the Court had struck down a similar law for men in 1905, declaring that it violated the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of laboring men's freedom to contract. (Not until the late 1930s did that change.) The women against the ERA had on their side male unionists who favored gender-specific restrictions because they prevented women from competing for some better-paid jobs. NWP feminists who proposed the ERA saw gender-specific labor laws as hampering women's employment opportunities; they envisioned women competing equally with men.

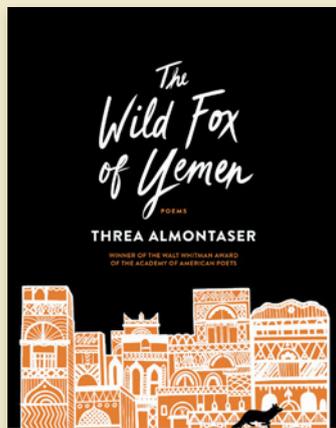
By the late 1920s, in the ILO and related committees of the League of

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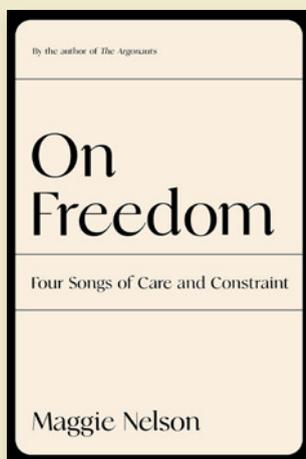
PILGRIM BELL Kaveh Akbar

“Incandescent. . . . Illuminat[ing] questions of divinity and language in swift, surprising lyrics.”
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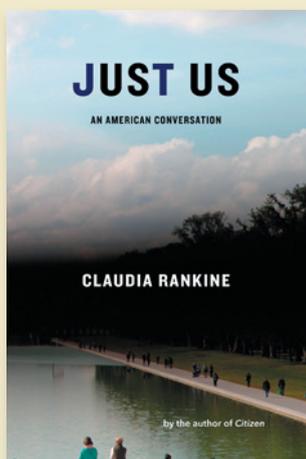
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“In these astonishing poems, Threa Almontaser razes all that would constrict her, forges new possibilities.”
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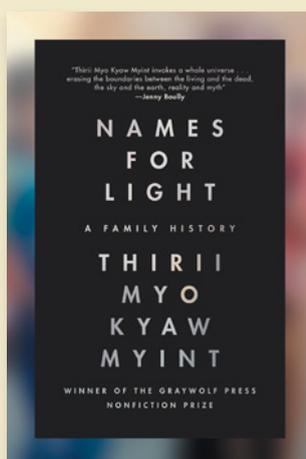
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—Hillary Kelly, *Vulture*



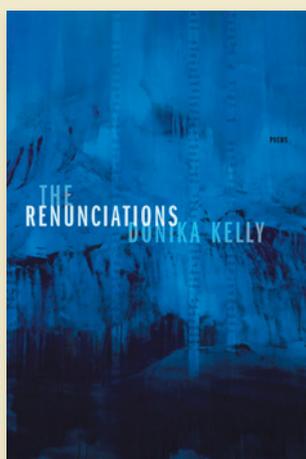
JUST US Claudia Rankine

An American Conversation
NOW IN PAPERBACK
“A work that should move, challenge, and transform every reader who encounters it.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



NAMES FOR LIGHT A Family History Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint

“This serpentine narrative is a thing of beauty.”
—*Publishers Weekly*



THE RENUNCIATIONS Donika Kelly

“Explores . . . the tenuous line between desire and trauma in poems that ache with memory and revelation.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

Nations, whenever “equal rights” were introduced in international meetings, similar fights occurred. The NWP too had an international presence, pressing for equal rights for men and women to be written into new treaties among nation-states, and Britain and other nations had their own equal rights advocates. Cobble’s “full rights” women worked against equal rights wherever possible, but neither side made real headway before the Great Depression set in and prospects for effective internationalism receded.

In the US, full rights feminists readily signed onto Roosevelt’s New Deal because of its support for workers’ rights. Younger women, notably Mary Anderson, the director of the Women’s Bureau in the US Department of Labor from 1920 to 1944, took on leading roles and continued to view proponents of equal rights as enemies, even when their central objection was eliminated, since the Roosevelt administration and eventually the Supreme Court approved protective labor laws for male as well as female workers. Full rights feminists continued to believe that equal rights were not in women’s interests (perhaps anticipating 1970s feminists who quipped that women who strove to be equal to men lacked imagination). Cobble sidesteps a discussion of equal rights supporters’ reasoning and why full rights feminists were not persuaded—although, for example, left-wing Latin American feminists showed that equal rights provisions could be combined with special provisions for mothers.⁴

While championing the full rights feminists she has identified, Cobble concedes that their larger aspirations “proved elusive.” They had some victories, including persuading Congress in 1934 to make the US join the ILO, where Americans had participated previously in nonmember capacities. But international regulations seldom built in what the full rights feminists wanted. They felt they had won a signal victory in 1937 when the ILO unanimously passed a resolution they devised, calling for full support of women’s economic, civil, and political rights, along with safeguards for motherhood and augmented protections in men’s hazardous workplaces. The League of Nations paid little attention, however, and as war descended on Europe the cause was put on hold. Even when they achieved long-sought international agreements—such as the ILO’s 1952 Maternity Convention stipulating cash benefits (from the state, not the employer) to both married and single mothers—the US refused to ratify. Other nations might have seen the ILO or UN pronouncements as establishing norms and passed legislation accordingly, but the United States rarely did.

Portraits of major characters as political actors from the 1920s through the 1970s animate Cobble’s story. They include the white women Katherine Ellickson, Frieda Miller, Frances Perkins, and Esther Peterson—all of them unionists who rose to high federal office—and the Black women Addie Wyatt (a major leader in the Amalgamated Meat Cutters union) and Maida

Springer Kemp (a garment maker who became the first Black woman to represent the AFL and CIO abroad). Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder and leader of the National Council of Negro Women (800,000 members strong in 1946), and the lawyer Pauli Murray, a peripatetic and creative enemy of sex and race discrimination, pop up too, as Cobble tries to show that full rights feminists not only were antifascist and anticolonialist after World War II but also sought to diminish race bias.

Peterson (1906–1997), an accomplished and politically savvy lifelong Democrat, plays a large part as Cobble tracks her and other women abroad after 1945. She lived in Brussels during the 1950s because of her diplomat husband’s appointment there, and threw herself into the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions’ outreach to women while also keeping in close touch with colleagues at the ILO. Back in the United States, she was appointed assistant commissioner of the Department of Labor by President Kennedy in 1961. In that capacity she led US efforts at the ILO, where she favored anti-colonialist criticism of international development projects and always urged that women have more control in them. But as cold war rivalries beset the ILO and other UN committees, the full rights feminists were captive: standoffs between defenders of a Communist system and defenders of capitalist democracy sabotaged any advance. The best Cobble can conclude is that the ILO was “an all-too-often-ignored site of consequential debate.”

The full rights group had admirable national and international objectives. It would be wonderful to have in place right now what they wanted, including living wages, strong labor organizations, a gender-neutral “rate for the job” approach to equalizing pay, national health insurance, and state-paid maternity benefits. Whether their practice was consistently “feminist” is another question. Cobble does not criticize them when they voluntarily subordinated women’s interests to the interests of workers’ or human rights, as they often did. She does not blink at their objection—which reflected their continuing opposition to the ERA at home—to putting the phrase “equal rights of men and women” in the preamble to the UN Charter. (It was included anyway.)

One US delegate to the UN Charter meeting whom Cobble counts a full rights feminist, Virginia Gildersleeve—previously a long-serving dean of Barnard College—opposed the proposal for a UN Commission on the Status of Women. Cobble defends Gildersleeve’s position that the commission affirming human rights and dignity already agreed to cover women as much as men. Gildersleeve spoke against distinguishing women’s issues from human rights for all. Latin American feminists argued more effectively that both commissions were necessary, and they won the day.

Cobble likewise has no quarrel with the position of her full rights feminists on Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The original bill banned employment discrimination based on “race, color, religion, or national origin.” On the floor of Congress, a wily white southern senator to whom the bill was

⁴See Katharine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).



anathema proposed adding “sex,” assuming that such an outrageous innovation would kill the bill. He was egged on by a few aging members of the National Woman’s Party who were pushing to make sex discrimination in employment illegal.

Peterson, by then special assistant to the president for consumer affairs, cheered the original purpose of the bill but opposed adding “sex.” Like many civil rights supporters, she feared the addition would undermine the bill; perhaps as important, she and others of her full rights outlook distrusted whatever the National Woman’s Party wanted. They had qualms about a federal ban on sex discrimination in employment, thinking it might banish state-level gender-specific protective labor laws.

Some strategic feminists with different priorities, however, such as Michi-

gan congresswoman Martha Griffiths, worked hard for the House to pass the bill with “sex” in it, despite the unsavory way its final form had come about. Fortunately, Title VII prohibited both race and sex discrimination in employment when it passed—with transformative effects on the labor market and women’s employment opportunities. Peterson supported the bill in the Senate after it passed the House, presumably hoping that its benefits would override its defects.

Peterson also deserves credit for having pressed President Kennedy—who trusted her because she had backed him since he entered politics—to create the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, a model she had in mind from her international work. Cobble does not mention that Peterson proposed the commission as something the

president could do for women that was an alternative to the ERA. Her motive aside, it’s unlikely Peterson foresaw that the commission’s multifaceted process and its landmark 1963 report would contribute, as it did, to the eruption of an unruly new feminism not long after.

The report woke up the American public to manifold forms of sex discrimination in state and federal laws that had never before been seen as such, in matters as diverse as drinking age, Social Security payments, bank credit, and hair length in swimming pools. These findings led to parallel investigatory commissions in the fifty states, while mobilizing scores of women (and some men) who had served on them to become local activists, including several founders of the National Organization for Women. The extraordinary breadth and impact of women’s move-

ments in the later 1960s and 1970s were unanticipated.

Neither Cobble’s *For the Many* nor Delap’s *Feminisms* chooses to explore how ground is prepared for a mass movement, though both mean to be constructive, writing with future feminisms in mind. Cobble does so by spelling out twentieth-century visions of “full rights” not yet fully realized; Delap instead exhibits a repertoire of schemes tried, celebrating some and warning about traps in others. Neither of them illuminates how a broad social movement takes fire. We know now that feminist voices have spoken out, often brilliantly, for hundreds of years. Why are some hearkened to, with cascading consequences, and others not? Since gender hierarchies persist—and drive continuing struggles—that complex story is still worth pondering. □

A Journey into Homer’s World

James Romm

Hearing Homer’s Song: The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry

by Robert Kanigel.
Knopf, 320 pp., \$28.95

Like Tantalus, classical scholars are forever glimpsing things they cannot taste, or experience, themselves. Phalanx warfare was so common in ancient Greece that most freeborn males took part in it many times. But its very ubiquity meant that Greek authors did little to describe it, relying instead on their readers’ familiarity. Their occasional offhand comments make us aware of how much is beyond our reach. Xenophon says of an infantry clash he witnessed, “There was no uproar, nor silence either, but that certain type of noise that results from anger and battle.” He speaks to those who had heard that noise, but what did it sound like?

Another sound that was often in the ears of the Greeks but lost to subsequent ages is that of Homeric song, the bardic tradition that produced, perhaps in the eighth century BC, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Accompanied by the *phorminx*, a kind of lyre, singers of epic tales performed at festivals and courts, narrating the feats of heroes who lived (if they lived) in the distant past. They used a distinctive verse form in which the lines consisted of six feet, each either a dactyl (DUM-di-dee) or a spondee (DUM-DUM), and relied on formulaic phrases—“fleet-footed Achilles”—that fit this metrical pattern. Someone the Greeks called Homer seems to have been the greatest of these bards, or at least his name was attached to the two masterworks emerging from the tradition. At some point, probably after Homer’s own time, they were written down and preserved, but for centuries thereafter singers known as rhapsodes continued to recite to the sound of the *phorminx* portions of the poems they knew by heart, or perhaps innovated according to their own tastes or those of their hearers.

Homer himself provides some of our best evidence concerning this bardic tradition. He has no word corresponding to “poet” and no concept of written



Milman Parry (center) with singers Jovan Govedarica and Mičo Savić, Yugoslavia, 1930s

texts; his bards are always called “singers” (*oidoi*) and their works “songs” (*oidai*). They perform to the lyre at royal banquets and feasts, their themes selected from a repertoire of “the deeds of gods and men,” as Penelope says in addressing Phemius, her court minstrel, in the *Odyssey*. The best of them are said to be blessed with a special gift of storytelling, a mastery of narrative technique. Demodocus, the blind bard at the court of the *Odyssey*’s King Alcinous, has a god-given ability to delight with his song, “in whatever way his heart bids him sing.” Both in his blindness and in his virtuosic skill, this master singer has often been seen as a self-portrait in miniature of Homer.

Homeric song was not only the means by which the heroic world was described. It also belonged to that world: bards were heroic and heroes were bards. When Achilles sits idle be-

side his tent, nursing his wrath, in the *Iliad*, he passes the time by singing of the glorious deeds of men to the sound of the lyre. When the disguised Odysseus, at the climax of the *Odyssey*, prepares to shoot down the intruders who are robbing him and courting his wife, he strings his great bow “just as a man skilled in the lyre and in song stretches a gut-string around a new peg” and plucks the weapon to produce a musical note. With that superb simile, Homer fuses the deeds of which he sings with the art of the singer. The song creates the hero, but the hero also creates song.

The life of the classicist Milman Parry, who died in 1935 at age thirty-three, is the story of one man’s inspired effort to recover Homeric song, not through books and research but lived experience. Parry’s time machine was a 1932

Ford sedan, in which he drove through the villages of what was then Yugoslavia, seeking the *guslars*, the Slavic singers of tales who practiced their art in coffeehouses and bars much as he imagined Homer did. In his tragically truncated career, cut short by a mysterious gunshot, Parry produced what the Hellenist C. A. Trypanis has called “the greatest [contribution] made by any American scholar to the field of classical studies.” In *Hearing Homer’s Song*, Robert Kanigel, a biographer of intellectual pioneers, has captured the excitement of this journey into the heroic world while noting the irony that the man who made it was hardly heroic himself. Emotionally remote, perhaps suffering from a “deficit of feeling,” cool even to the poems he made his life’s work, the Parry Kanigel describes is hardly the man we might have picked as our emissary to the Homeric age, but the records he brought back from that journey are nonetheless invaluable.

Homerists had understood, for centuries before Parry’s time, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were formed differently from literary epics like Vergil’s *Aeneid* or Apollonius Rhodius’s *Argonautica*. The oral tradition, by which stories were passed along in preliterate Greece, was known to have played a part in the composition of the Homeric epics, but how great a part was a matter of debate. Their quality was so high that many critics believed a single genius must have shaped them, presumably with the aid of writing, for literacy and genius were conventionally thought to go hand in hand.

In the early eighteenth century Giambattista Vico opposed this “great poet” theory, ascribing the poems to a diffuse, anonymous, folkloric process that had come to be called “Homer” for the sake of convenience. “The Greek peoples were themselves Homer,” Vico wrote in *La Scienza Nuova*. Later that century, the Englishman Robert Wood reverted to the idea of Homer’s original genius but, noting that his poems described his world with great clarity yet never once mentioned writing or reading, proposed that the Greeks were not yet a literate people at the time that he