



# Editing a Scholarly Persona in the New Field of Women's History – Gerda Lerner's Integrations and Taboos<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Gerda Lerner (1920–2013) was one of the most influential figures in the development of women's and gender history. She knew the power of auto/biography and very consciously controlled her image through autobiographical writing. In this paper I want to analyze how Lerner built her *scholarly persona* to a large part on her autobiographical practices and how she kept on 'editing' this persona during her career and after it ended, aiming to integrate her various positions of exclusion and taboos as well as her diverse pioneering achievements. Looking more closely at three of Lerner's autobiographical representations and inquiring into the gendered nature of the *scholarly persona* (with special regard to domestic arrangements), I want to illustrate how she was grappling with the integration of feminist consciousness into her scholarly selfhood in the late 1970s. At the same time, she made sure that her care work for her dying husband would not be visible to the scientific community. Other identities also remained taboo and could only be revealed after her career had ended – these include not only her well-known autobiographical outing as a Communist, but also her twenty-year identification as a housewife, which could only be related after leaving academia.

*Keywords:* scholarly persona, gender, domestic work, Women's History

## Zusammenfassung

Gerda Lerner (1920-2013) war eine maßgebliche und einflussreiche Akteurin im Feld der Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte. Sie wusste um die Macht der Auto/Biografie und steuerte ihr Image bewusst durch autobiografisches Schreiben. In diesem Beitrag analysiere ich, wie Lerner ihre wissenschaftliche *persona* zu einem großen Teil auf ihren autobiografischen Praktiken aufbaute und wie sie diese Persona während ihrer Karriere und nach deren Ende weiter ‘bearbeitete’, um die unterschiedlichen Ausgrenzungen und Marginalisierungen, die sie erfahren hatte, die Lebensbrüche und Tabuisierungen darum sowie ihre vielfältigen Pionierleistungen miteinander in Einklang zu bringen. Indem ich drei autobiografische Darstellungen Lerner näher betrachte und nach der geschlechtsspezifischen Natur der wissenschaftlichen *persona* (unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Haus- und Pflegearbeit) frage, möchte ich zeigen, wie sie in den späten 1970er Jahren mit der Integration feministischen Bewusstseins in ihr wissenschaftliches Selbstverständnis rang. Gleichzeitig achtete sie darauf, dass ihre Pflegearbeit für ihren sterbenden Mann für die wissenschaftliche Gemeinschaft nicht allzu sichtbar wurde. Auch andere Identitäten blieben tabu und konnten erst nach dem Ende ihrer Karriere preisgegeben werden – dazu gehört nicht nur ihr bekanntes autobiografisches Outing als Kommunistin, sondern auch ihr über zwanzig Jahre andauerndes Leben als Hausfrau, von dem sie erst nach dem Ausscheiden aus dem Wissenschaftsbetrieb ganz offen sprach.

*Schlagerworte:* Wissenschaftliche *persona*, Geschlecht, Hausarbeit, Frauengeschichte

‘I want people to understand that my contribution has been lived experience and theory.’ –

Gerda Lerner

## Scholarly Persona and Autobiographical Writing

She [Gerda Lerner] was impatient for those who couldn’t see women’s history as a big picture, as an understanding that we lived in history, that the choices we make about the shape of our lives infuse how we understand that past. [...] For me – and I know for many of us – Gerda was the wind at my back. Fiercely insisting that I not flinch from the big questions, that I try to understand that what we do matters, that there is no separation between the personal and the political. That the life choices

that we make as lovers and intimates will shape our professional and practical and civic lives [...].<sup>2</sup>

With these words, women's historian Lina K. Kerber commemorated her friend and colleague Gerda Lerner (1920–2013) at a memorial symposium of the Radcliffe Institute – pointing right to the connection between 'gendered and embodied experience' and 'both scholarly careers and scholarly thought,' which has become a focus of attention in Intellectual History or the History of Science in recent years.<sup>3</sup> This connection was obviously of great importance to Gerda Lerner throughout her career – a career that led her to be celebrated as 'the single most influential figure in the development of women's and gender history since the 1960s'<sup>4</sup> by the 'all-star team of women's history' less than a year after her death in 2013.<sup>5</sup> Lerner's energetic commitment to women's history, her passionate ambition, her critique of the sexist bias and deficiencies of traditional history (with its organizations and networks), her talent for community and institution building, her model programs for teaching women's history, her writings on methodology and last but not least, her pioneering scholarship for her two-volume magnum opus *Women in History*<sup>6</sup> – combining a *longue durée* approach with radical political and feminist claims<sup>7</sup> – have indeed all contributed significantly to the development of women's history as an academic discipline since the early 1970s.

As a pioneer in her field and feeling the 'absence of female role models'<sup>8</sup> herself, Lerner was acutely aware of the importance of what has recently been conceptualized as the *scholarly persona*. This concept was first defined by Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum in 2003, following notions of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss. It was defined as a 'mask', 'template' or 'prototype', lying '[i]ntermediate between the individual biography and the social institution [...]: a cultural identity that simultaneously shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared recognizable physiognomy.'<sup>9</sup> As early as 1979 Lerner declared: 'I was not willing to choose amateur and marginal status in my profession.'<sup>10</sup> With this goal in mind, she carefully constructed her scientific identity, scrutinizing old and new repertoires in the academic field and in her life, in order to fashion herself into a credible and reliable scholar in the eyes of her fellow scientists and the wider public.

Mineke Bosch – drawing on Thomas Etzemüller, Steven Shapin and Lies Wesseling –, Kristi Niskanen and Rozemarijn Van de Wal have argued for extensions of the persona concept in recent years, especially with regard to the categories of gender, class and race. They have also advocated an integration of identity performance and embodiment into the concept and, not least, have viewed the interplay with recent auto/biographical research as crucial.<sup>11</sup> Again, these ideas resonate with Lerner's own,

as she was among those shaping the analytical categories of class, gender, race, religion. She also integrated aspects such as age or physical health into her analysis – a method that has later been termed intersectionality.<sup>12</sup> Very early on Lerner knew: ‘What I brought as a [female, Jewish, exiled, radical and older, KP] person to history was inseparable from my intellectual approach to the subject; I never accepted the need for a separation of theory and practice.’<sup>13</sup> Conversely, she was also aware that she could not integrate all these aspects of her personality and personal history into her scholarly persona if she wanted to succeed. Rather, it would be necessary to conceal some of them completely. As a trained social historian, she remained skeptical about postmodernism and cultural studies – not least gender studies – and pursued coherence, generalizations and ‘wholeness’<sup>14</sup> throughout her work and in the creation of her persona, but she still documented her many diverse identities abundantly and quite precisely. In Lerner’s profusion of identities, it is not easy to make out blanks, ignored or even hidden dimensions. Nonetheless, taboos obviously did exist, and were very much related to the ‘gendered nature of the scholarly persona.’<sup>15</sup>

Johanna Gehmacher demonstrates convincingly in her essay ‘Im/possible Careers’ in this volume that there is a close link between this ‘gendered nature of scholarly personae and the mostly invisible but essential support domestic arrangements provided (and still provide) to scholars. It is therefore essential to combine the analysis of hegemonic scholarly identity concepts on the one hand and the exploration of practical and economic support in familial and para-familial contexts on the other.’<sup>16</sup> Lerner is an interesting case in point of how everyday life and daily chores seemingly could *not* be integrated into a female scientific persona during the 1970s. It was a clear taboo – one of the few Lerner did not address herself, even later in life. While she was very outspoken in her work about the realities women faced in work and in life and about gendered divisions of labor in general, in her early autobiographical writing she touched only cursorily on her own relationships and family arrangements in the context of knowledge production and how they promoted or impeded her academic career. She remained totally oblique on how she arranged the domestic and clerical support necessary for her enormous body of work and on the question ‘When did the genius do the chores?’ A partial explanation for this might be that most of her career as a historian coincided with a time when she was a widow (from 1972 onward) and when her children were already grown up. In the introductions to *Women in History* she described herself as a solitary scholar:<sup>17</sup> ‘This work was done in years of solitary living; most likely, it could not have been done otherwise.’<sup>18</sup> At the same time, she named her important friends and colleagues and pointed out the essential support they provided. So ‘solitary living’ for Lerner meant living without a traditional core family, and scholarly work was obviously not a ‘family affair’ for her.<sup>19</sup>

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In this paper I want to examine Lerner’s autobiographical performances and representations, looking at the bricolage of ‘diverse identities’ that she adopted in her various accounts ‘in accordance with changing historical circumstances’ and ‘in the face of a particular audience and in relation to a specific context.’<sup>20</sup> Lerner herself urged historians to ‘evaluate first-person primary sources critically and compensate for their inadequacies, omissions and distortions with additional research.’<sup>21</sup> I am interested in the tensions, contradictions and omissions between her ‘professional’ and her ‘private’ autobiographical writing and also in the differences between her early and her later autobiographical accounts. I want to show how Lerner built her scholarly persona to a large extent on her autobiographical practices and how she kept on ‘editing’ this persona during her career and even after she retired. I also want to illustrate how she was grappling with the question of whether feminism was an acceptable part of her scholarly persona in the late 1970s; how she decided at the same time that her care work for her dying husband – during her formative period as a historian – should not be visible to a scientific community, but could very well be communicated to other audiences; and how Lerner – who had been a housewife for twenty years before she began her career as a historian – could only relate that part of her identity after this career had been successfully accomplished, at a time when she also outed herself as a former Communist.

Lerner knew the power of auto/biography and was a person who very consciously set agendas and controlled her image through autobiographical writing.<sup>22</sup> Of the fifteen books she published, five can be classified as autobiographical reflections on her professional and personal life. And there is much more material apart from these published works, as Lerner reflected on herself continuously in diaries and notebooks. ‘My mother chronicled everything – and I mean: everything,’ her daughter Stephanie Lerner-Lapius declared at the aforementioned memorial symposium, where it was also announced that Gerda Lerner’s personal papers – assembled over a lifespan of 90 years – would be included in the Schlesinger library. In this article, I want to focus on Lerner’s published autobiographical accounts – encompassing over 1300 pages – taking a closer look at three of them in order to provide an initial sketch or layer for an analysis of Lerner’s scholarly persona that can be expanded and critiqued in interaction with her diaries, letters and other ego-documents. Gerda Lerner’s first clearly autobiographical publication (at least according to Philippe Lejeune’s definition<sup>23</sup>) in 1978 opens with these lines:

This book is a fragment made up of fragments. It is a fragment of the imagination, a distorted aspect of a larger whole. Distorted by subjectivity and pain, distorted by shame, even though I have struggled against it, distorted most of all by my limited

vision. It is, in short, nothing else than all works of art: experience filtered through the mind and the feelings of one-subject-agent. It differs from literature in that the events happened “actually”, and that the names and the characters and the places are real. That seems, even as I write it, an odd statement, for the way I see it now the distinctions between the actual, the imaginary and the mythical are more tenuous than I had understood earlier. [...] Perhaps all of it will add up to a sort of truth: layered, organic, functional.<sup>24</sup>

Having experienced flight and exile,<sup>25</sup> Lerner understood identity early on ‘as an ongoing, collective, fragmented, cultural and contextual process.’<sup>26</sup> ‘Fragment’, ‘layer’, ‘version’ and ‘pattern’ are concepts that would remain central to her autobiographical writing throughout the following thirty years. As already indicated above she was extremely conscious of the patterns she produced, but she also kept re/discovering new layers of herself that contradicted earlier versions of her story. While Lerner reflected determinedly on such contradictions and did not seek to overwrite or dissolve them, she *did* try to integrate her transformations coherently and to find guiding principles in her life stories. The impulse to construct such integrative monuments is understandable, when one considers that Gerda Lerner had to deal with radical changes in her life early on. Analyzing her autobiographical accounts though, one often finds it difficult to look behind her fixed patterns that appear as ‘autobiographical manifestos’ (Sidonie Smith).<sup>27</sup> Behind her own continuing analysis of taboos and integrations it is not easy to discern how Lerner set out on a daily basis to challenge ‘all conceptual models of history’<sup>28</sup> – as she put it later – and with them also the repertoires of scholarly personae for (male) historians. In a way her autobiographical manifestos might even obscure her actual embodiment of a trustworthy and yet rebellious scholar, who was engaging ‘in the daily practices of the historical discipline – in the negotiations over institutional power, the guarding of implicit codes and norms, dress, gestures and bodily behavior, the tone of voice, housing and the use of design.’<sup>29</sup> In order to advance further on these questions, numerous other sources still need to be analyzed. Nevertheless, it is helpful to start by examining three of Lerner’s autobiographical representations, inquiring into the integration of feminist consciousness into her scholarly selfhood and into the gendered nature of her scholarly persona with regard to domestic arrangements. Therefore I will analyze *The Majority Finds Its Past* (1979), *A Death of One's Own* (1978) and in the end *Fireweed* (2002), her most conventional autobiography, in this order – not quite chronologically, thus first establishing Lerner as a scholar in her field, then as a house/wife (both in the late 1970s) and finally going back into her previous life to show other identities, that she could not perform or integrate at the start of her career.

## New Feminism [The Majority Finds Its Past, 1979]

The 1970s were decisive years for women's history, feminism and, of course, Gerda Lerner. At this time 'Gerda was not quite the complete Gerda that she became later,'<sup>30</sup> as Alice Kessler-Harris, another one of Lerner's renowned friends and colleagues, put it. Up to 1966 she had worked on her doctoral thesis and had already started to give courses on women's history. Furthermore, she had acquired funding, networked in relevant organizations<sup>31</sup> and published two voluminous source collections.<sup>32</sup> She had also started to reflect on theory and methodology in her field in several papers. In the midst of all this activity, her husband Carl Lerner was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 1972, just as the first M.A. Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College was getting off the ground, a program initiated and organized by Gerda Lerner.<sup>33</sup> She nursed him through the eighteen months of his terminal illness, while continuing to do her work. Five years after his death, at the end of this tumultuous decennium, Lerner published two very different titles, both of which were (at least in parts) autobiographical accounts, albeit in very different ways:<sup>34</sup> *A Death of One's Own* (1978) and *The Majority Finds Its Past. Placing Women in History* (1979). The spheres covered by these two books – which, following an equally classic and problematic dichotomy, could be described as 'private' and 'professional' – remained strictly separated from each other, apart from conspicuously few selective points of intersection and of course the same first-person narrator. Paradoxically, the word 'historian' – often and proudly used by Lerner as a self-designation – was completely absent from the first book. Conversely, Lerner's husband was not mentioned anywhere in the second book, in which she traced her trajectory as a historian for the first time.

Although it appeared a little later, I would like to focus first on *The Majority Finds Its Past. Placing Women in History* (1979). In this volume of essays, she reflected on her most important theories and scholarly practices between 1969 and 1979 and included her first autobiographical representation in a scholarly context as an introduction. On twenty pages entitled 'Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction,' she recounted how she became a historian late in life (in 1958) while working on a fictionalized biography of Angelina and Sarah Grimké – agents for antislavery and women's rights. She did not introduce the Grimké sisters, obviously assuming that her readers, an American academic community, were familiar with them. In just two paragraphs she recapped her life up to that point:

My formal education had ended about twenty years earlier, when I took my "Matura", the final exam qualifying a student for admission to university training,

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just after the accession of the Nazis to power in Austria. I passed the exam with distinguished honor; but instead of entering the university, I became a refugee and later made my way to America. Here I married, raised two children and earned my living at every variety of women's jobs. And I always was a writer. It was as good an education as any for becoming a specialist in the history of women. [...] I shared the experience of most ordinary women as an unskilled and later semi-skilled worker, as a housewife, a mother, a child-bearer, community activist.<sup>35</sup>

Even though Lerner hid nothing and presented herself as a 'refugee', 'housewife', even 'community activist', the stories behind the buzzwords were silenced in this enumeration. One learns nothing beyond them. The essay focused mainly on Lerner's attempt to 'develop a theory of Women's history' as well as on her reflections on whether she wanted to position herself as a 'feminist scholar.' Lerner was also still hesitant at the time to combine the repertoire of the writer with that of the historian. The creativity of the writer might have seemed incompatible with the credibility of the scholar at first glance, but obviously her identity as a writer was most important to her, as later accounts also showed. In retrospect, she found that she 'could not help but bring my writer's consciousness into my historical writing.'<sup>36</sup> But she only dared to integrate her artistic identity and creative writing practices more openly into the self-fashioning of her scientific persona after she had been repeatedly awarded for her writing skills. In a late essay on this topic – 'The Historian and the Writer' – she offered some insight into her first scholarly autobiographical writing:

It [my writing background, KP] inspired me to open my book *The Majority Finds Its Past* with a long autobiographical essay at a time when such a practice was not only unheard of but discouraged by respectable historians. That essay was the most popular part of the book and has been more frequently reprinted and taught than have the other essays. It also opened the way for other historians to dare to inject themselves into a book of serious academic scholarship and to make their 'standpoint' clear, thereby challenging the myth of historians' neutrality in regard to their research.<sup>37</sup>

This assertion was certainly not least a strategic positioning, because in fact in the 20th century many intellectuals – among them Ludwig Wittgenstein, Georg Lukács and others known to Lerner – had consciously broken with 'theoretical anonymity' in order to explore scientific boundaries and transgressions, to establish new fields of research and methods and last but not least, to gain popularity.<sup>38</sup> In her exemplary analysis 'Charles Darwin as a Celebrity,' Janet Browne showed that Darwin worked hard the



last twenty years of his life constructing his public identity as a top scientist and that his fame was ascribable in particular to 'the autobiographical elements in the books, which have been so frequently overlooked.'<sup>39</sup> Almost fifty years earlier Gertrude Stein had already autobiographically written 'both of and against the gendered institutions and practices of her time' in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). The subtlety and playfulness of her subversion is still astounding, but obviously left no mark on Lerner.<sup>40</sup>

I would like to return now to her identification as a 'feminist scholar.' In terms of her popularity and her need for allies, Gerda Lerner should have deemed it interesting and probably important to join forces with the second-wave feminists. The fact that she did not, however, remains a matter that requires explanation – so much so that she included the taboo of her 'feminist consciousness' as a central confession and integration in *The Majority Finds Its Past*. Lerner used the qualifier 'yet *not* [...] a feminist historian'<sup>41</sup> throughout the 1970s for many reasons, though not all of them become sufficiently apparent. One main reason she gave as to why she 'made a sharp distinction between myself as a citizen and active feminist and myself as a scholar of the history of women'<sup>42</sup> was that she had 'stopped all political and social activity for the duration of my graduate studies.'<sup>43</sup> She mentioned her involvement in the production of the film *Black Like Me* – I will come back to that film, which Carl Lerner directed and produced – as her last action as a 'premature civil rights activist.' In the same paragraph she claimed – quite out of the blue and without any substantiating evidence – that as a political activist she had also been a 'premature feminist.'<sup>44</sup> The late 1970s were still part of the Cold War period, and it is understandable that Lerner could not yet reveal her previous political involvement as a leftist radical and Communist, as she later would in 2002. Lerner presumably at first displayed her 'underground mentality' also in academia. She later explained this 'mentality' in *Fireweed*. As a new American she did not dare at first to live her political convictions, afraid of jeopardizing her American citizenship.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, in the field of scholarly research, she was initially intent on conforming – and political, ideological stances had no place in that context either.

Lerner repeatedly emphasized her professional and traditional (social historical) training, her firm grasp of methodology, her accuracy in relation to sources, and her diligence. She exhibited the usual 'set of discipline-specific virtues and skills deemed necessary to work and to be recognized as an academic historian'<sup>46</sup> such as patience, attention to detail, perseverance, discipline and conscientiousness, accuracy, completeness, honesty and self-sacrifice. It is not surprising that Lerner initially projected a rather traditional scholarly persona in order to support the establishment of Women's History as a legitimate arena of study. Like 'all women scholars and

scientists [she] knew [...] the importance of clothing as an aspect of the social world of science'<sup>47</sup> and appeared in the professional woman's costume with shirt and skirt, later often bespectacled and with a practical short haircut that was very unlike the hairstyles of young feminists Gloria Steinem, Kate Millett or Shulamith Firestone. Being around 40 at the time, Lerner was certainly already a "'different" student'<sup>48</sup> and she felt that her 'exotic' interests and questions as well as her drive and ambition continued to mark her as a 'freak.'<sup>49</sup> Unlike the female professors in International Relations, who were interviewed by Sara Dunstan and who like Lerner had earned their doctorates in the mid-twentieth century, Lerner did not visibly embody her role as mother and wife anymore, but she still had a 'keen sense of being considered "other" to the norm of the field.'<sup>50</sup> Like these female scholars, perhaps even more acutely, she 'understood [her] scholarly output in terms of resistance to prevailing norms within the field.'<sup>51</sup> Yet Gerda Lerner was also well aware that resistance to tradition alone did not create new content, paths and models:

In order to write and research the history of women, historians must have the best of traditional training and practice their craft with rigorous skill, and then they must go beyond it. Yet I, too, searched for a new definition of professionalism, different from the male academic model. As usual, it was easier to know what not to do than it was to know what to do.<sup>52</sup>

With her prim and conservative appearance, Lerner steadily, pragmatically and in the end successfully began to move through academia who presented itself as 'gender coded machinery' – as Per Wisselgren put it – 'with restricted accessibility, invisible obstacles and infrastructural flaws' like 'closed doors', 'glass ceilings' and 'leaky pipelines'.<sup>53</sup> To Lerner the image of the academic world as a 'palace or home of free and unbiased knowledge'<sup>54</sup> was surely an issue and clearly often put her in a quandary, especially as a new, enthusiastic academic. She admitted as much later: '[...] I had to unlearn much of my previous reliance on established academic structures and conventions [...].'<sup>55</sup> In the end her declared intention was nothing less than to completely rebuild this 'house of knowledge,' but without destroying it. Her critique of the basic assumptions of (historical) knowledge thus emerged through a slow, complex process that involved a lot of adaptation, strategic thinking and networking. She clearly also had to withstand a great deal of criticism. Had she been a 'young woman just out of college,' Lerner stated, she 'probably could not have withstood the social pressure, subtle ridicule, constant discouragement, and, not infrequently, open disapproval.'<sup>56</sup> Another colleague, Marjorie Lamberti, shared her recollections: 'In these years, Lerner received little or no encouragement from the gatekeepers of the

historical profession's premier journals [...]. The editors who rejected Lerner's manuscripts claimed that her work was marred by "presentism" and "politicized rhetoric".<sup>57</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris also recalled the intense hostility that women's historians still faced in the 1970s. It was a struggle, and her colleagues remember Lerner as fearlessly, stubbornly, even 'crazily' advancing her cause.<sup>58</sup> In this situation, it probably seemed strategically wiser not to associate oneself too closely with the new feminists, especially since Lerner had doubts, not least in terms of content. Above all, she had reservations about the feminist theory of 'the universality and priority of sexual oppression as an experience common to all women. She argued, "However useful that concept may be as an agitational tool, it does not work as a tool for historic analysis."<sup>59</sup> Even before delving into the feminist movement, she had already found herself annoyed with one of its initiators, Betty Friedan, after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 – at a time, when she was still active in civil rights issues. Frequent references have been made to her appreciative but critical letter to Friedan,<sup>60</sup> but Lerner later admitted that Friedan's unreflected focus on white middle class women was not the only thing that had outraged her:

[...] I was appalled by the prevailing attitude toward housewives, who were treated as backward and unimportant. The young women in the movement had no knowledge of the long and radical history of housewives and mothers in community organizing; they were preoccupied with their conflicts with their own mothers.<sup>61</sup>

Lerner was probably also offended, because it was her own story as a 'radical housewife and mother' in the 'doldrums period' between the first and the second wave of feminism that had thus gone unacknowledged.<sup>62</sup> But the time had not yet come to reveal this aspect of her past. Thirty years later she would also remember that during the establishment of the first M.A. Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College, she and her colleagues Joan Kelly, Eva Kollisch and Sherry Ortner were 'at different levels of commitment to feminist thought and practice, and we found that by respectfully acknowledging these differences and making them visible to our students we strengthened their educational experience.'<sup>63</sup> Ortner as the youngest was the most 'outspokenly feminist.'

In the end, time was needed for self-reflection and self-awareness in order to relearn and recognize, also in Lerner's case: 'My thinking took place at a time when many women began to ask questions similar to my own and began to act on those questions, thereby creating a new context for thought.'<sup>64</sup> She realized: 'It is typical of the intellectual progression of many women toward feminism that we first accept the most

obvious legal and political demands, while denying staunchly the pervasiveness, universality, and the extent of the subordination of women. I was no exception.’<sup>65</sup> And she could finally declare in 1979: ‘The two aspects of my own consciousness, that of the citizen and that of the woman scholar, finally fused: I am a feminist scholar.’<sup>66</sup> The nature of her commitment to feminism between 1963 and 1979 was ultimately also a question of time, as Lerner recalled:

[in] a way, my three years of graduate study were the happiest years of my life. It was hard, absorbing work, constant challenges, but mostly, it was the first time in my life I had time and space for thinking and learning. I could not have done it so quickly, if I had not had a supportive husband and son, who relieved me of many domestic responsibilities. Greedy for knowledge, the way only people who have long been denied an education can be, I gave up all recreation, social life, and other interests. [...] More than anything else I was driven by an urgency to learn what I needed to know in order to carry out a passionate ambition which by then had taken concrete shape in my mind.<sup>67</sup>

Here Lerner mentioned her nuclear family for the first and only time and even referred directly to ‘domestic responsibilities.’ Interestingly enough, she reproduced the exact wording of this passage thirty years later in another autobiographical essay, but eliminated the sentence about her ‘supportive husband and son.’<sup>68</sup> Why her daughter was not mentioned at all and why this particular sentence was later deleted are questions to which the published autobiographical sources do not provide any answers. They do make clear, however, that aside from this sentence and the term ‘housewife’ (among many others in the enumeration concerning Lerner’s past life), housework had no place in the construction of scholarly personae (feminist or not) or in the academic world itself.

### **Another Kind of Care Work [A Death of One’s Own, 1978]**

While working on the essays and the autobiographical introduction to *The Majority Finds Its Past* (1979) Lerner also wrote an autobiographical text on care work, recounting the premature death of her husband Carl. This book received scant scholarly attention and is altogether difficult to categorize. Apparently, it had little or no impact on her scientific persona, nor was it intended to – which makes it all the more intriguing.

In *A Death of One's Own*, she described Carl Lerner's last one and a half years of hospital and home care. It is necessarily a book on everyday life, daily chores and above all care work at a time when hospices were not yet established institutions. One learns from the book that Lerner was a working woman, that she worked at a college and that her work was quite important to her – but nothing beyond that. Not a word about the immense groundwork she had laid in the field of Women's History in those years, about the struggles involved, about her central topical concerns. When a doctor advised her to give up working immediately, she was bitterly indignant – but apart from this barely three-page reflection on the importance of work in general and for Lerner in particular, the subject of academic work was not addressed at all.<sup>69</sup> In this book, Lerner did not embody or perform her identity in the historical profession. She was just a wife focusing on her dying husband, dealing openly with problems, conflicts or sexuality with a dying person. It was the personal story of the end of her marriage, but her marriage in itself was not at all an issue. Very early on, she delimited this topic for herself declaring:

Nothing here can do justice to the achievement and meaning of our thirty-three years of joint experience. The simple statement that for this long time ours was [a] happy and deeply satisfying marriage seems somewhat suspect, even preposterous. That it was a marriage which allowed for the growth of each of us and in which each supplied for the other the steady trust necessary for such growth will have meaning only to those who have experienced a similar relationship; to others such words will have no concreteness.<sup>70</sup>

This delimitation was probably not so much about Lerner's own image (scholarly or otherwise) but had to do more with death itself and certain taboos on speaking badly about the deceased. One of the few references she made to their life together before Carl's illness was this statement: 'We kept our professional lives independent from each other.'<sup>71</sup> This sounds very different from the 'artistic collaboration' she later continuously evoked in *Fireweed* and omits that the Lerner's even started out as a working couple. All existing autobiographical accounts by Lerner have a noteworthy omission: They all fail to describe the last collaboration between the Lerner's in 1963/64. This collaboration affected her and her relationship with him in a way that she did not want to make public. When Gerda was actually supposed to be finishing her master's degree and preparing for her doctorate, her husband reached out for her support in his filming of *Black Like Me*, based on one of the most highly acclaimed books of the day by the white author John Howard Griffin. The historian Albert Lichtblau, who interviewed Lerner in November 2003, wrote that Lerner did not really 'go into great

detail about her experience with the film.<sup>72</sup> After the initial filmscript by a well-known writer proved unacceptable, Carl apparently ‘urged Gerda to write the screenplay herself, and she let him talk her into it since this was, after all, her husband’s debut as a film director.’<sup>73</sup> Incidentally, both Gerda and Carl were credited for the screenplay, even though Gerda Lerner repeatedly stated: ‘I wrote the screenplay and worked on production with him.’<sup>74</sup> Lichtblau also reported that Carl needed Gerda as the ‘bad guy’ to resolve conflicts with the producers since he ‘was too much of a gentle soul to play hardball with them.’<sup>75</sup> The film version of *Black Like Me* was still a ‘politically explosive undertaking’ in 1963. Thus the Lerner’s were once again united here not only in artistic collaboration but also as radical political activists, advancing racial justice and the early civil rights movement. Again, they were under pressure and suspicion – and this was probably the moment when Gerda decided against any further political engagement. In *A Death of One’s Own*, the Lerner’s political history was only very tentatively hinted at with one casual reference to Carl as ‘an old political fighter.’<sup>76</sup> No mention was made of his political affiliation. It would not be until 2002 that Gerda would dare to state it bluntly in *Fireweed*, where she wrote: ‘Carl was a Communist when I met him.’<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Gerda Lerner was raising a clear social and political concern in *A Death of One’s Own* – she was advocating a humane approach to death and the dying, thus backing the nascent hospice movement. ‘Well, Gerda Lerner was a social movement – seriously [...]’ – as Linda Gordon jokingly said in her talk on Lerner.<sup>78</sup> Was this already an accurate portrayal in 1978/79? Was this kind of social engagement already part of her scholarly persona? Her confrontation with political feminism, described above, already shows that this was not the case.

At this juncture, however, I would like to take a closer look to see if and how this care work for her husband inscribed itself in her scholarly identity. Again, I think that was not the case. *A Death of One’s Own* was obviously not addressed to her scientific community but to a wider public, to people in a similar situation, though not as a self-help manual but as a personal story of a marriage and of a man facing death. Nonetheless, Lerner still took pains not to place herself in the domestic space doing housework and care work. Instead she was the one who organized and analyzed care work; she explained how she organized home care or arranged for a nurse or companion to be constantly present. She devoted an entire chapter to describing the day-nurses, six in all, who accompanied the Lerner’s on this eighteen-month journey. And she also mentioned in one sentence that she had help keeping house: ‘I had a housekeeper who stayed through it all, a kind immigrant woman who had lived over thirty years in this country but still retained the basic values of her peasant background: the dying belong at home; the dying have rights.’<sup>79</sup> Coming from a well-to-do family Lerner had customarily grown up with servants, but she had also lived

for 20 years in circumstances where any kind of domestic help would have been an unimaginable luxury. Not least, she continued being influenced by Marxist thought long after she left the Communist Party (CP).<sup>80</sup> In that sense, she found herself different from 'middle class women who [...] believed family obligations and equally shared household responsibilities could be gained by private negotiations and by education'<sup>81</sup> In her paper 'Just a Housewife,' first presented in October 1977 at the conference *The Future of Housework, the Role of the Housewife, and Sharing Arrangements for Child Care*, Lerner also took credit for the topic and the concept. She historicized the role of housework and domestic service (to her 'one of the most exploited occupations' in the United States, but not in Europe!)<sup>82</sup>, concluding:

The confinement of women to the sex-linked housewife-breeder-feeder role has been the key element in her subordination in all her other societal roles. The position of women in society can be ameliorated, but it cannot be decisively altered until "occupation housewife" has ceased to be gender-defined and has become supported or supplanted by other arrangements for the raising of children and the nurturance of the people. To accomplish this will demand the transforming and restructuring of all institutions of society and the creation of new forms of community.<sup>83</sup>

Here and in a shortened version of this article in *The Female Experience*<sup>84</sup> she was all theory and made not a single autobiographical reference to her own experiences. In *A Death of One's Own* Lerner as housewife, as caretaker also stayed intangible. In that book, she resorted to poetic language when talking about keeping house. She did not just keep house – she kept house in the face of and against death:

I am keeping house against Death. I banish him by meticulous neatness. Order and precision are the signs of the cross that weaken his power. He is random, disorderly, aimless [...].

I am keeping house against Death. He loathes vigor, strenuous effort, persistent defiance. Like all bullies he can be banished by defiance. [...]

I am keeping house in hell. A tidy house with a strong clean broom, sweeping ashes and brimstones into neat, even piles before the hot winds scatter them again. Grand, chaotic storms of ashes and destruction swirling around me.<sup>85</sup>

It was not until 2009, looking back on the 1977 conference, that Lerner would admit an autobiographical interest in the topic of housekeeping:

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My interest in the subject goes back to decades of organizational work in communities, when I was myself a housewife and young mother. I organized for improvements in the neighborhood schools, for peace, for support of the United Nations, and for childcare centers and after-school day care centers.<sup>86</sup>

However, Lerner never reflected on the realities of her own work and life as part of a couple in this context. She remained obscure about her individual modes of negotiating the terms of production in her partnership within a gendered society, influenced by contemporary subcultures but also by mainstream perceptions.<sup>87</sup> When analyzing 'Female Clusters, Female Networks, Social Spaces' in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* Lerner did describe working couples in terms of the woman usually carrying on 'all her domestic work in kitchen, laundry and clothing meticulously' besides her intellectual work. She concluded that 'very few married or mated women [...] helped advance feminist thought and that should not be surprising. [...] Most women [who were feminist thinkers, KP] [...] did their significant work in a single state either prior to marriage, during widowhood or as women who, by choice, remained single.'<sup>88</sup> So, interestingly enough, working couples did not really come up in or fit into Lerner's theory. Altogether it becomes obvious that the repertoire of housewife and caretaker did not fit into Lerner's scholarly persona – it might even be called a clear taboo for a female scientist in the 1970s and beyond.

Of course, there is still the fact that Lerner published *A Death of One's Own* at all and she also recalled readers of this book often approaching her after professional talks to thank her.<sup>89</sup> However, in her writing itself there were clear barriers between *A Death of One's Own* and the academic world. If rare overlaps did occur, Lerner made sure to put herself in the role of the intellectual analyzing the situation even in the private sphere, and did not go into detail either on her relationship or on the question of if and how she did the chores – she had nurses, her children, friends and a housekeeper after all. Lerner did look back several times, asking herself how she had tackled her workloads, including the mental and emotional strains. She recalled the 'enormous amount of stress'<sup>90</sup> during the years her husband was dying even in later autobiographical accounts – or related that she had felt like a 'super-woman-juggler-on-a-tight-rope'.<sup>91</sup>

Paradoxically, although she wrote a whole book on his death, her husband was never a part of her professional life at the time and not a visible presence in it. Thus, Lerner did not buy into the 'gendered narrative of unsought success,' by playing on the 'scholarly repertoire of disinterestedness and ingenuity,' as Mineke Bosch described it.<sup>92</sup> In *A Death of One's Own* she made clear that she lived for her work, even though she did not specify that she worked as a historian. She also established that too



closely accompanying the death of someone you love is a heavy burden – but she did not describe the tasks she took on and the amount of time she spent at home. What stays with the reader in the end is the image of a woman who makes sense of a tragic blow, confronts the implications of dying, sees an important part of her life come to an end and transforms into a widow. One feels quite sure that she will not engage in a romantic relationship of any kind again, after her life partner has gone. So, what the book accomplishes in the end is to add to Lerner’s scholarly persona the image of the writing widow, capable of analyzing even the most terrible blows of fate and suggestively celibate. She was now ready to tap into the ‘ancient repertoire of the selfless and self-absorbed scientist’ living solely for Women’s History. However, unlike the developmental psychology expert Judith Harris who ‘contrasted her own disinterested position with that of salaried colleagues,’<sup>93</sup> Lerner did aim to achieve recognition and fame, at the very least in her new field.<sup>94</sup>

### **Artistic Collaborators without a Collaborative Housekeeping Arrangement [Fireweed, 2002]**

She succeeded. In the introduction to *Fireweed*, published in 2002, she wrote:

My specialty, the history of women, did not exist as a field of study when I began my career. I started out as an embattled outsider and in thirty-six years of steady effort have been an agent in the transformation of traditional history. My career has brought me rewarding work, professional recognition, acclaim and many public honors. [...] I consider myself fortunate to have been a participant and a leader in an intellectual revolution that gave women their history [...]. In the past decades I have been frequently interviewed and questioned about my life and my development as a historian. I have been urged to write the story of my “brilliant career.” Yet I have chosen here to tell not the end of the story, but what went before. My academic career is an open book. But I have been silent about my political past during the years of my academic success. And such silence, for all its complex reasons, distorts the truth.<sup>95</sup>

So, at the beginning of the new millennium, retired at least from institutions and daily business, Lerner broke the major taboo hidden behind her scholarly performance and finally took steps ‘to set the record straight’ on her Communist past, as she did not ‘want to end my life within a closet of my own making.’<sup>96</sup> She also had another autobiographical purpose, which she stated at the end of her book:

People who have only known me in these past decades inevitably regard me as successful, privileged and “strong,” as though these characteristics were lifelong, inborn or given. I know better, and that is another reason why I wrote this book about struggles, mistakes, detours and searches for direction.<sup>97</sup>

In her most conventional, ‘partial’ and ‘political’ autobiography Gerda Lerner recounted for the first time her childhood and youth during the interwar period in Vienna – a time of great political tensions. She described being born in 1920 into the wealthy Jewish Kronstein family and soon finding herself in opposition to her bourgeois upbringing due to the influence of modern literature, friends and travel experiences. In this book she was able to come to terms with her ambivalent and complex relationship with her unconventional, modern and proto-feminist mother – the painter Ilona Kronstein. She had first alluded to this difficult relationship in *A Death of One's Own*, and it had remained present, beneath the surface, throughout her autobiographical writing since then and would merit a study in its own right: ‘Her desperate struggle between the demands of her talent and the constraints of society was my scenario.’<sup>98</sup> Here she also succeeded – after her own fierce struggles – in coming to grips with how the National Socialists had treated her, depriving her of her rights and citizenship, persecuting her as a Jew, putting her into jail and finally driving her into exile. Fortunately, they were unaware that she was a dedicated and active left-wing radical at the time. That alone would have put her in a dangerous position under the Austrofascist Dollfuss/Schuschnigg regime (1933–1938). Lerner's Communist network was ultimately also instrumental in helping her to immigrate to the United States in April 1939 by way of a ‘marriage of convenience’ with an Austrian Communist, who had already managed to settle in New York. In 1941 she could offer this self-evaluation:

[...] I am 21; I've lived under six different governments; I've been a student, a Nanny, a housemaid, a research worker, a salesgirl, an office worker; I've worked in a factory and I've worked in hospitals; I've been in prison and I've gone to the opera twice a week. I've been married, divorced and now married again. I've supported myself for the last three years. Four years ago I used to have a governess, because my father thought it was proper [...]<sup>99</sup>

When Lerner first recounted her trajectory to a scientific community nearly 40 years later, she stressed that she became a refugee ‘instead of entering the university’ in Vienna.<sup>100</sup> This comment shows that earning a degree already seemed quite

conceivable to a bourgeois daughter like her<sup>101</sup> – since 1921, at least, when Elise Richter became the first woman to hold a professorship in Austria, albeit not a full one. Lerner’s life in America, however, unfolded very differently – and here I want to come back to the question of domestic arrangements. *Fireweed* was also the first time Lerner could describe her life as a housewife during the 1940s and 1950s, though she kept insisting that her twenty years of household, children and relationship management had quite a different backdrop because of her exile, her political activism and her artistic ambitions.

Her path into a new American life started with Carl Lerner, whom she met in New York in 1940 in connection with an amateur theater production by her refugee youth group. She married him in Hollywood in the autumn of 1941, right after both of their first marriages had been terminated by divorce. Although Carl was unemployed in the early 1940s and thus did not embody the typical male breadwinner, his aspirations for a career in the film industry were what led the young couple to settle in Hollywood. Whereas Gerda felt it was self-evident that she secure some kind of work for herself immediately, he at first refused to do ‘menial jobs.’ In the end he did accept a job on an assembly line and – as Gerda recounted – they ‘each worked forty-eight hours a week and spent the half-day Saturday on joint housecleaning.’<sup>102</sup>

Although they both earned their living by unskilled labor, they identified as artists. Gerda had considered herself a writer since age 16 and – after some modest success with her first story – was determined to make it as a professional writer in her second language, English.<sup>103</sup> Looking back on their life together, she repeatedly referred to herself and her husband as ‘artistic collaborators’ and to Carl as her ‘mentor in politics, art, film and literature’.<sup>104</sup> Apart from him giving her feedback on her writing, they also produced joint screenplays, which – so it seems – were mostly credited solely to Carl. In early 1942 Gerda got her ‘big break’ when she landed a job as an x-ray technician. In June 1943, she was granted US citizenship. Around the same time, she also became pregnant and summed up the situation in 1944 as follows: ‘Motherhood took over, pushing everything else into the background.’<sup>105</sup> She quit her job and was a full-time housewife after the birth of her daughter Stephanie in 1944. Meanwhile Carl was making steady progress in his career in the film industry. Together with a friend, who was an author and had also had a baby recently, Gerda set up a ‘collaborative housekeeping arrangement.’ While her friend’s husband also shopped and cooked, Carl was not part of the arrangement – he had to work: ‘Good pay, but bad hours.’<sup>106</sup> It seems that classical European and American gender hierarchies remained mostly intact in the Lerner’s relationship – and with them gendered binaries, imbalances, inequalities and in/visibilities of various sorts.<sup>107</sup>

Her horror at the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki prompted Gerda Lerner to become politically active in the United States. She joined the peace movement in 1945 and in 1946 also the Communist Party as 'a strong international movement for progress and social justice.'<sup>108</sup> Her husband was already a party member when she met him. Much later, Lerner emphasized her critical attitude toward the way the CP treated women in general and 'problematical housewives' in particular, although she was not as outspoken on the 'machismo' of Communist men as other female Communists her age.<sup>109</sup> Lerner certainly did not want to be reduced to a 'helpmate in the socialist struggle,' but at the same time she was 'proud' to be a housewife, to 'do all that was needed to keep my family comfortable,' to be involved in grassroots organizational work and to have some hours left over to write creatively.<sup>110</sup>

In 1947 the situation for Communists in the United States worsened considerably. To Gerda Lerner the years 1947 to 1949 even felt 'like a reprise of the coming of fascism'<sup>111</sup> (a parallel that she would frequently draw in her autobiographical writing and that also merits closer inspection). Carl Lerner was blacklisted and again unemployed at that time – nevertheless, there was no question that Gerda Lerner was responsible for the children and the domestic chores. He only 'pitched in and helped me carrying groceries, housecleaning and Stephanie's care, as best as he could.' Gerda was pregnant then with her second child, her son Dan, who was born in late autumn 1947.<sup>112</sup> For the sake of Carl's career, the Lerner family moved back to New York in 1949. The possibility of Gerda becoming the family breadwinner (as was the case in some exiled or blacklisted families) was apparently never an option. While Carl struggled to get back into the film business, Gerda recalled a time of dread and horror, but also – in the early 1950s –

[...] an incredible amount of activity, some of it ordinary in a family with school-age children, most of it chosen. [...] Part of the effort was a great investment of my time in child-centered activities – PTA, playgroup, school trips, music lessons, activities around birthdays, holidays, vacations. Partly out of economic necessity and partly because I believed it made for a good family life, I cooked, baked and served all the family's meals. Carl's erratic employment schedule did not permit us regularly to eat dinner together [...]. I often served three dinners [...] Like many other radical parents in those times, we tried to shield our children from our fears and anxieties.<sup>113</sup>

For several months – from the fall of 1952 to the summer of 1953 – Gerda Lerner tried going back to work in the medical field, but soon quit again, as her earnings hardly exceeded the expenses for babysitting, carfare etc.<sup>114</sup> Through all this she continued to

pursue a literary career and published her first novel *No Farewell* in 1951. In the 1950s she was – after 12 years – finally working on her second unpublished novel *Start a Stone*, dealing with the struggle for housing integration in New York. Meanwhile she had also produced short stories and political writings on local subjects. Last but not least she had collaborated with colleagues in writing and organizing dramatic presentations such as *Singing of Women* (1950) or *Bread and Roses Too* (1954) as part of her political commitment. Looking back, she was struck ‘by the sharpness of our feminist critique [...] and by the limitations of our understanding, which cast solutions always within the Marxist framework of the “woman question”’.<sup>115</sup> Lerner’s writing usually dealt with political events and structures – except her poems, although they too had echoes of political agencies. In her autobiographical writing, she mentioned Karl Kraus as a role model several times – an author, who aimed at social impact and who was very concerned with facts, citation and documentation but who also wrote poetry.<sup>116</sup> In a similar way Lerner’s political activism shaped her writing, whose main audience was a semi-underground cultural movement organized by blacklisted individuals.<sup>117</sup>

In February 1956 Nikita Khrushchev revealed Stalin’s crimes, and the reaction of the CPUSA caused the Lerner to leave the party – their political work seemed to have failed. Gerda Lerner remembered 1956 as a ‘bad year’, marked by chronic health problems and: ‘It was also a time of stress in our marriage; we were out of synch with each other.’<sup>118</sup> Carl was finally advancing steadily in his career, while Gerda was stuck. In 1957 the situation improved somewhat when Carl involved Gerda in a ‘joint project.’ Together they created a documentary of the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, an early event in the civil rights movement that involved a black march on Washington on May 17th. The film soon vanished, as the people who had commissioned it found it ‘too radical.’<sup>119</sup> Sometime in 1958 – an even worse year than 1956 – Gerda Lerner finally found her way back to writing, but in a new mode. She wanted to write a historical novel on Angelina and Sarah Grimké, ‘daughters of a Southern plantation owner, who become agents for antislavery and women’s rights.’<sup>120</sup> From then on things moved fast:

I decided that I needed formal training as a historian to do justice to this story [...]. I enrolled at the New School, where I earned my B.A. in four years of part-time study; then I earned my M.A. and Ph.D. at Columbia University in three more years, with the Grimké biography as [my] dissertation. While still an undergraduate, I offered my first course in Women’s History at the New School in 1963 [...]. Thus, my career as a historian began almost by accident; I thought of it as a way of acquiring a skill necessary to my writing. But history as a subject grabbed me and

never let me go and before long, when I realized that what I wanted to do was to create and promote the history of women, I put all my energy, passion and talent into becoming a good historian.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, in 1958 the formation of Gerda Lerner’s scholarly persona began. Although it was evident to her early on, not least as a historian, that feminist and socialist movements had often developed together,<sup>122</sup> she hesitated and struggled to bring the political aspects of her personality into her scholarly persona as mapped out in the first chapters of this paper. In the end, however, *Fireweed* was not just a matter of revealing taboo areas of her life, of exposing insecurities, struggles and mistakes. Even or especially as an autobiographer, Lerner remained a historian documenting women’s history – in her book she described her engagement in the WIDF (Women’s International Democratic Federation), one of the biggest and most influential women’s organizations of the post-1945 era, in several chapters. Western scholars are still largely ignorant about the WIDF and – not surprisingly with regard to Lerner’s story – the ‘overarching reason for the WIDF’s exclusion from the historiography is the impact of the Cold War on the organization’s history and archives.’<sup>123</sup> Lerner, who – ‘frightened’ and ‘humiliated – remembered burning ‘papers, reports, publications and correspondence’ pertaining to the WIDF in her house – ‘Once again, my underground psychology took over’<sup>124</sup> –, also tried to restore the feminist and social movements she had participated in as an eyewitness in the end.

### **The Autobiographical Practice of Continued Editing (by Way of a Conclusion)**

Francisca de Haan, who researched the history of the WIDF, also pointed out how self-reflexivity and situated knowledge strongly resonate with feminist studies and women’s history, at least from the 1980s.<sup>125</sup> It appears that Lerner also understood this early on: ‘I write to find out what I know. What I know now is different from what I knew then.’<sup>126</sup> She continued to produce autobiographical writing throughout her life, crafting and performing her scholarly persona and thus adapting it the new positions of her ‘historical I’.<sup>127</sup> After the release of *The Majority Finds Its Past* in 1979, she published two more volumes of autobiographical-theoretical self-reflection: *Why History Matters. Life and Thought* (1997) and *Living With History. Making Social Change* (2009). The first book drew the ‘connection between Lerner’s Jewishness and [her] work in women’s history.’ Marjorie Lamberti has already analyzed certain aspects of

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this 'weave of connections' in a compelling essay.<sup>128</sup> Lerner's concern to connect her life experiences with her research followed the same pattern here as before:

In 1979 I wrote: "The two aspects of my consciousness, that of the citizen and that of the woman scholar, had finally fused: I am a feminist scholar." The essays in the current volumes trace another expansion of consciousness: the fusing of my own life experience as a Jewish woman refugee with my work as a scholar concerned with race, class and gender.<sup>129</sup>

In her autobiographical writing she sought time and again to connect her identities, combining the different spheres in her life and finding 'wholeness':

I end this autobiography in 1958, the year that marked the major transitions in my life: from outsider to insider, from writer to historian, from activist to theoretician. Even as I write this, I realize these distinctions are not apt. They still reflect my earlier consciousness, one of absolutes and choices. The fact is that I combine all these elements in my life, and I think I have finally found a wholeness that embraces contradiction [...].<sup>130</sup>

Not all scholars are so explicit in their documentation, reflection and presentation of their intellectual and private trajectories. Lerner's stories of integrations are highly interesting, but it is difficult to remain focused and critical of her complex weave of images, stories and myths without losing oneself in her performances and in the abundance of material. The present paper's overview shows that Lerner's autobiographical negotiation of her identities and the construction of her scholarly persona were by no means congruent and yet were extensively interrelated. A closer study of both her autobiographical practices and their interrelationships with the concept of the scholarly persona would be necessary, both to better understand the relationship between theory and autobiography and to add, again, new dimensions to the concept of the scholarly persona, such as the question of taboos itself. After all, it is fascinating that Lerner – although she took such a clear feminist approach to women's and gender history in her main work – initially did not dare to declare herself a feminist in her professional environment. Likewise, it is remarkable that her previous life as a housewife and care worker had to remain largely taboo during her academic career.

In the end Lerner's 'bricolage' of so many different and often contradictory cultural vocabularies and repertoires – writer, scholar, feminist, Jew, radical, American, European, mother, widow, daughter, wife, gatekeeper, novice etc. – and her insistence

on keeping all these identities present through autobiographical reflection might have had a detrimental effect on her visibility and fame as a scholar. But even if she did not shape a completely new and clearly outlined persona or defined a tone, a style or layout as Thomas Etzemüller argued the Bielefeld historians had,<sup>131</sup> she still offered different repertoires for a new field and remains fascinating in her autobiographical practice of continued editing of her scholarly persona and of reflecting and negotiating her identities with openness and persistence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For discussion, feedback and advice I thank Johanna Gehmacher with whom it is always a pleasure to explore new topics and Kirsti Niskanen, who introduced us to the concept of the scholarly persona. I dedicate this article to Eugen Pfister, with whom I could find a twenty-first century collaborative housekeeping arrangement in our scholarly household – with two sons and a (sometimes sleeping) dog during the various lockdowns of the 2019–2021 pandemic – that kept us both healthy, sane and reasonably productive... albeit always with some delays.

<sup>2</sup> Kerber, Linda K., 'Why History Matters', Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX\\_du5-lLas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX_du5-lLas). Date accessed: 12 May 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Dunstan, Sara C., 'Women's International Thought in the Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Academy: Autobiographical Reflection, Oral History and Scholarly Habitus', in: *Gender and History* 33:2 (2021), 487–512, (487–489); Daston, Lorraine and H. Otto Sibum, 'Introduction: Scientific Personae and Their Histories', in: *Science in Context* 16 (2003) 1–8.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon, Linda, 'Gerda Lerner (1920–2013)', <http://www.gerdalerner.com/biography/>. Date accessed: 12 May 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, Liz, 'Why History Matters', Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX\\_du5-lLas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX_du5-lLas). Date accessed: 12 May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1986; Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness. From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Müller, Albert, 'Gerda Lerner und die feministische Frauengeschichte', in: Hacker, Hanna and Susanne Hochreiter, *Was wir. Beiträge für Ursula Kuben-Hofman*, Vienna: Praesens-Verlag, 2013, 167–175.

<sup>8</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *The Majority Finds Its Past. Placing Women in History*, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1979 (xxiii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].

<sup>9</sup> Daston, Lorraine and H. Otto Sibum 2003, 1–8.

<sup>10</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxiii) [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].

<sup>11</sup> Bosch, Mineke, 'Scholarly Personae and Twentieth-Century Historians: Explorations of a Concept', in: *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 131 (2016) 33–54; Bosch, Mineke, 'Persona and the Performance of Identity. Parallel Developments in the Biographical Historiography of Science and Gender, and the Related Uses of Self Narrative', in: *L'Homme* 24:2 (2013) 11–22; Niskanen, Kirsti, Mineke Bosch and Kaat Wils, 'Scientific Personae in Theory and Practice – Ways of Creating Scientific, Scholarly, and Artistic Identities', in: *Persona Studies* 4:1 (2018) 1–5; Van den Wal, Rozemarijn, 'Constructing the Persona of a Professional Historian. On Eileen Power's Early Career Persona Formation and Her Year in Paris, 1910–1911', in: *Persona Studies* 4:1 (2018) 32–44.

<sup>12</sup> Kessler-Harris, Alice, 'Why History Matters', Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX\\_du5-lLas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX_du5-lLas). Date accessed: 12 May 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxi). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].

<sup>14</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (163–179). [Chapter: Holistic History].

<sup>15</sup> See Johanna Gehmacher, in this volume.

<sup>16</sup> See Johanna Gehmacher, in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Algazi, Gadi, 'At the Study: Notes on the Production of the Scholarly Self', in: Stefanovska, Malina and David Warren Sabeau (eds.), *Space and Self in Early Modern European Cultures*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, 17–50 (21–25).

<sup>18</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1993 (x).

<sup>19</sup> See Kirsti Niskanen, in this volume. Lerner for instance never used the family metaphor in a scholarly context, which is probably in a first place due to a difference between research practices in natural sciences and humanities, but might also be noteworthy with regard to her community of gender historians as a scholarly collective. It is also interesting that Lerner wrote very little about rivals, critics and scientific opponents and did so only in her late accounts.

<sup>20</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2013, 20–21.

- <sup>21</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (151). [Chapter: Autobiography, Biography, Memory, and the Truth].
- <sup>22</sup> Gehmacher, Johanna, 'Leben Schreiben. Stichworte zur biografischen Thematisierung als historiografisches Format', in: Dreidemy, Lucily et. al. (eds.), *Bananen, Cola, Zeitgeschichte: Oliver Rathkolb und das lange 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 2, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau, 2015, 1013–1026.
- <sup>23</sup> Lejeune, Philippe, "'Der autobiographische Pakt' (1973/75)", in: Niggel, Günter (ed.), *Die Autobiographie. Zu Form und Geschichte einer literarischen Gattung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998, 214–257 (215–234).
- <sup>24</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *A Death of One's Own*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985 (7). Lerner repeatedly placed similar disclaimers at the beginning of her autobiographical texts – up to the last one from 2009 – see Lerner, Gerda 2009, (23). [Chapter: A Life of Learning].
- <sup>25</sup> See Messinger, Irene and Katharina Prager, 'Doing Gender, Doing Difference. Die interdependente Kategorie Gender in der Exil- und Migrationsforschung', in: Messinger, Irene and Katharina Prager (eds.), *Doing Gender in Exile: Geschlechterverhältnisse, Konstruktionen und Netzwerke in Bewegung*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2019, 7–28; Gehmacher, Johanna and Katharina Prager, 'Transnationale Leben – Formen, Begriffe und Zugriffe', in: Klein, Christian (ed.), *Handbuch Biographie*, second revised edition, Heidelberg: Metzler Verlag, 2022. (forthcoming August 2022)
- <sup>26</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2016, 35.
- <sup>27</sup> See also Smith, Sidonie, 'The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics', in: *Prose Studies* 14:2 (1991) 186–212.
- <sup>28</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (157). [Chapter: Placing Women in History. Definitions and Challenges].
- <sup>29</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2016, 34–35.
- <sup>30</sup> Kessler-Harris, Alice, 'Why History Matters', Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX\\_du5-lLas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX_du5-lLas). Date accessed: 12 May 2022.
- <sup>31</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009, 38–50. [Chapter: Women among the Professors of History].
- <sup>32</sup> Lerner, Gerda (ed.), *Black women in white America. A documentary history*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972; Lerner, Gerda (ed.), *The Female Experience. An American Documentary*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1977.
- <sup>33</sup> This assertion is certainly debatable with regard to two previous publications. Not only did her novel *No Farewell* (New York: Associated Authors, 1955) detail Lerner's autobiographical experiences as the daughter in a bourgeois Jewish family in Vienna between 1934 and 1938, but her dissertation, a biography of the Grimké sisters (Lerner, Gerda, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina. Rebels against Slavery*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), also contains a strong 'sense of [Lerner's] self' and decidedly auto/biographical reflections on being a refugee – more so than her autobiography *Fireweed* later on, contrary to what her colleagues claim (see Kessler-Harris, Alice and Linda Kerber, 'Why History Matters: A Panel Discussion', Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6xv2u\]kuFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6xv2u]kuFU)). Date accessed: 12 May 2022). If, however, one follows Philippe Lejeune's very narrow criteria, one can consider these two books as her first autobiographical writings.
- <sup>34</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (52–70). [Chapter: The M.A. Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College].
- <sup>35</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xv–xvi). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>36</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (157). [Chapter: The Historian and the Writer].
- <sup>37</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>38</sup> On autobiography and theory, see: Thomä, Dieter, Ulrich Schmid and Vincent Kaufmann, *Der Einfall des Lebens. Theorie als geheime Autobiographie*, Berlin: Aufbau, 2015 (7–18). See also Eckel, Jan, 'Historiography, Biography, and Experience. The Case of Hans Rothfels', in: Berghahn, Volker R. and Simone Lässig (eds.), *Biography Between Structure and Agency. Central European Lives in International Historiography*, New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2008, 85–102.
- <sup>39</sup> Browne, Janet, 'Charles Darwin as a Celebrity', in: *Science in Context* 16 (2003) 175–194. The quote from Bosch, Mineke 2013, 16.
- <sup>40</sup> Doyle, Nora, 'Gertrude Stein and the Domestication of Genius in the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas', in: *Feminist Studies* 44 (2018) 43–69 (69).

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- <sup>41</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxvi). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>42</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>43</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxvii–xxviii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>44</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>45</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *Fireweed. A Political Autobiography*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002 (191, 228).
- <sup>46</sup> Paul, Herman, ‘Performing History: How Historical Scholarship is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues’, in: *History and Theory* 50:1 (2011) 1–19; Niskanen, Kirsti, Mineke Bosch and Kaat Wils 2018, 2.
- <sup>47</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2016, 53.
- <sup>48</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xix). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>49</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (38). [Chapter: Women among the Professors of History].
- <sup>50</sup> Dunstan, Sara C. 2020, 501–503.
- <sup>51</sup> Idem, 20.
- <sup>52</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxiii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>53</sup> Wisselgren, Per, ‘Women and extra-academic social research in Sweden 1900–1950: A sociology of knowledge approach’, in: *International Review of Sociology* 31:1 (2021) 123–143.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>55</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (8). [Chapter: Introduction].
- <sup>56</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xx). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>57</sup> Lamberti, Marjorie, ‘Blazing New Paths in Historiography: “Refugee Effect” and American Experience in the Professional Trajectory of Gerda Lerner’, in Daum, Andreas W., Hartmut Lehmann and James J. Sheehan (eds.), *The Second Generation. Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2016, 244–258 (248).
- <sup>58</sup> Kessler-Harris, Alice and Linda Kerber, ‘Why History Matters: A Panel Discussion’, Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6xv2uJkuFU>. Date accessed: 12 May 2022.
- <sup>59</sup> Lamberti, Marjorie 2016, 248–249; Lerner, Gerda 1979 (31–47) [Chapter: The Feminists. A Second Look], (129–144) [Chapter: Just a Housewife].
- <sup>60</sup> Radcliffe Institute, ‘Gerda Lerner’s Letter to Betty Friedan’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIYGH3tgAOY>. Date accessed: 12 May 2022.
- <sup>61</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (52–70) (61). [Chapter: The M.A. Program in Women’s History at Sarah Lawrence College].
- <sup>62</sup> See Lerner, Gerda 2009 (85–102). [Chapter: Midwestern Leaders of the Modern Women’s Movement]; Gordon, Linda, ‘Why History Matters’, Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX\\_du5-lLas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX_du5-lLas). Date accessed: 12 May 2022.
- <sup>63</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (57). [Chapter: The M.A. Program in Women’s History at Sarah Lawrence College].
- <sup>64</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxxii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>65</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (38). [Chapter: The Feminists. A Second Look].
- <sup>66</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxxii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>67</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xix). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>68</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (29). [Chapter: A Life of Learning].
- <sup>69</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1985 (77–79).
- <sup>70</sup> Idem, page 208.
- <sup>71</sup> Idem, page 29.
- <sup>72</sup> Lichtblau, Albert, ‘Fighting Racism. Gerda & Carl Lerner’s Film *Black Like Me*’, in: Eleanore Lapping (ed.), *Jews and Film. Vienna. Prague. Hollywood*, Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2004, 150–159 (154).
- <sup>73</sup> Idem, page 156.
- <sup>74</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxvii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>75</sup> Lichtblau, Albert 2004, 154.
- <sup>76</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1985 (7–8).
- <sup>77</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (185).

- <sup>78</sup> Gordon, Linda, 'Why History Matters', Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX\\_du5-lLas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jX_du5-lLas). Date accessed: 12 May 2022.
- <sup>79</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1985 (106–116) (109).
- <sup>80</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (351) ('[...] the years it took me to think my way out, not of one political movement only, but out of Marxism, the theory.')
- <sup>81</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (93). [Chapter: Midwestern Leaders of the Modern Women's Movement]. In *Fireweed* Lerner points to Mary Inman's 'sophisticated analysis of housewives as exploited workers, which was controversially but broadly received in the CPUSA. Lerner, Gerda 2002 (264).
- <sup>82</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (134). [Chapter: Just a Housewife].
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, page 144.
- <sup>84</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1977 (108–114).
- <sup>85</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1985 (188–190).
- <sup>86</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (61). [Chapter: The M.A. Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College].
- <sup>87</sup> On working couples in arts and science, see: Fornoff-Petrowski, Christine and Melanie Unseld, 'Paare in Kunst und Wissenschaft. Zur Einleitung', in: Fornoff-Petrowski, Christine and Melanie Unseld (eds.), *Paare in Kunst und Wissenschaft*. Göttingen et al.: Vandenhoeck, 2021.
- <sup>88</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1993 (224).
- <sup>89</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *Ein eigener Tod*, Königstein im Taunus: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2001 (6–11) (9).
- <sup>90</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2009 (53). [Chapter: The M.A. Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College].
- <sup>91</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1985 (106).
- <sup>92</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2016, 53.
- <sup>93</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2013, 12.
- <sup>94</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xxiii). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>95</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (2–3).
- <sup>96</sup> *Idem*, 3. Incidentally, she was not the only historian with such a secret – see historians outing themselves as Communists: Popkin, Jeremy D., *History, Historians & Autobiography*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- <sup>97</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (368).
- <sup>98</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1985 (162).
- <sup>99</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (210–211).
- <sup>100</sup> Lerner, Gerda 1979 (xvi). [Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, by Way of an Introduction].
- <sup>101</sup> See Simon, Gertrud, *Hintertreppen zum Elfenbeinturm. Höhere Mädchenbildung in Österreich. Anfänge und Entwicklungen*, Vienna: Wiener Frauenverlag, 1993.
- <sup>102</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (203–204).
- <sup>103</sup> *Idem*, page 210, 216.
- <sup>104</sup> *Idem*, page 210, 232–233.
- <sup>105</sup> *Idem*, page 241.
- <sup>106</sup> *Idem*, page 242–243.
- <sup>107</sup> See Hausen, Karin, 'Die Polarisierung der "Geschlechtscharaktere" – eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben', in: Werner Conze (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas. Neue Forschungen*, Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1976, 363–393.
- <sup>108</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (243–254) (254).
- <sup>109</sup> Prager, Katharina, "'Also ich glaub, daß es ein Stückelr Geschichte Österreichs ist ...' – Rosl Ebners autobiografisches Schreiben zwischen 1981 und 1987', in: Stumpf-Fischer, Edith, Linda Erker and Anna Drechsel-Burkhard (eds.), Rosl Ebner, "... daß du die Stimmung der Jahrzehnte spürst", Vienna: PRaeSENS, 2019, 327–344.
- <sup>110</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (249, 262–263).
- <sup>111</sup> *Idem*, page 277.
- <sup>112</sup> *Idem*, page 281.
- <sup>113</sup> *Idem*, page 336.
- <sup>114</sup> *Idem*, page 340.
- <sup>115</sup> *Idem*, page 323–340.

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<sup>116</sup> Prager, Katharina, “...the need to redefine and rethink...” – Die Historikerin Gerda Lerner und der Sprachdenker Karl Kraus’, in: *fernetzt*, June 2016. <http://www.univie.ac.at/fernetzt/the-need-to-redefine-and-rethink-die-historikerin-gerda-lerner-und-der-sprachdenker-karl-kraus>.

<sup>117</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (342–343).

<sup>118</sup> Idem, page 352.

<sup>119</sup> Idem, page 363.

<sup>120</sup> Idem, page 363.

<sup>121</sup> Idem, page 367.

<sup>122</sup> De Haan, Francisca, ‘Writing Inter/Transnational History: the Case of Women’s Movements and Feminisms’, in: Haider-Wilson, Barbara, William D. Goodsey and Wolfgang Müller (eds.), *International History in Theory and Practice*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2021, 501–536 (515).

<sup>123</sup> De Haan, Francisca 2021, 523.

<sup>124</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (373).

<sup>125</sup> De Haan, Francisca 2021, 509.

<sup>126</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (369).

<sup>127</sup> Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>128</sup> On Lerner’s Jewish identity, see Lamberti, Marjorie 2016. See also Antler, Joyce, ‘Why History Matters’, Radcliffe Institute, 5 December 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXdu5-ILas>. Date accessed: 12 May 2022.

<sup>129</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *Why History Matters. Life and Thought*, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1997 (xi–xvii).

<sup>130</sup> Lerner, Gerda 2002 (368).

<sup>131</sup> Bosch, Mineke 2016, 35.