



**LIFE NARRATIVES AND GENDER:  
Voices of Women in the Near East and Eastern  
Mediterranean**



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Voices of Women in the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean**

The Orient-Institut Istanbul Spring Lecture Series

April-June 2021

Convened by Richard Wittmann and Gülşah Torunoğlu

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This lecture series focuses on life narratives as gendered historical or literary texts in the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean. Autobiographical writings take multiple shapes and forms. In the most straightforward sense, autobiography means self-narration, the act of writing one's life. While often done so in a diary, memoir, or letter, life narratives come in a great number of other literary forms of expression that are not conventionally recognized as autobiography, including novels, poems, or even epitaphs. In studying how lived experiences are translated into written form, it has been argued by Philippe Lejeune (*The Autobiographical Pact*), that what is needed — and sufficient— for a text to be autobiographical is the unity of author, narrator, and the character who is being talked about.

Others would argue that no such unity is possible. Instead, they question the transition from experience to individual consciousness, and individual consciousness to larger collective identities: whether there is something that binds experience to identity, identity to politics, or, at least, to a concept of subjectivity that is not fully determined in and by a gendered discourse. In other words, how are gendered conceptions of the self being shaped through the discourses of self-narration or self-disclosure, and to what extent does autobiographical writing itself become informed by a gendered discourse? How do these debates play themselves out in the context of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean over different historical periods?

On a more basic level, we are confronted with the challenge of making life narratives written by women visible and an integral part of the academic discourse: The canonical tradition in autobiographical research and history writing has privileged a male- and Western viewpoint. Furthermore, personal accounts in general have only recently become more widely accepted as “legitimate” sources for the study of history, with the life narratives of women having received even less attention, let alone those of (non-Western) women of diverse cultural, socio-religious, and linguistic backgrounds.

The speakers of this lecture series will present their research on autobiographical texts of the wider Near Eastern region from different historical periods and from their respective areas of expertise by exploring how these two concepts – gender and the self – interact with each other in the creation of life narratives. The contributions to this lecture series and the resultant discussions aim to offer insights into the myriad of lived experiences in Near Eastern literature.

### **Program and Speakers**

Leigh Gilmore (Ohio State University) - April 28, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)

Paulina Dominik (Freie Universität Berlin) - May 5, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)

Efthymia Kanner (University of Athens) - May 26, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)

Nova Robinson (Seattle University) - June 2, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)

Julia Phillips Cohen (Vanderbilt University) - June 9, 2021, 20.00 - 21:00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)

### **Registration Information:**

The lectures will be held online via Zoom.

Registration information will be announced shortly.

If you have any questions, please contact us at [info@mappinggenderneareast.org](mailto:info@mappinggenderneareast.org)

For technical reasons, the number of participants is limited. You will be informed about the organizational and technical procedure a day before the lectures start.

### **Conveners:**

Richard Wittmann, Gülşah Torunoğlu (Orient-Institut Istanbul)

## **DETAILED PROGRAM**

**Leigh Gilmore (Ohio State University) - April 28, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)**

### TITLE:

Autobiographics: Gender, Life Narrative, and Self-Representation

### SHORT SYNOPSIS:

This lecture revisits the author's field-defining work of life writing and feminist theory, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, to consider the significance of gender to the durable themes of identity, memory, and veracity in life narrative. More than a lens on the lives of women life writers, gender offers a way to think through the constitution of literary canons and cultural archives, whose lives are understood as representative and why, and the relation between literary experimentation and challenges to categories of identity.

### BIO:

Leigh Gilmore's interdisciplinary feminist research focuses on testimony, trauma, and cultural process of judgment in life writing and law. Her recent books include *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (Columbia 2017) and *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (co-authored with Elizabeth Marshall, Fordham 2019), as well as *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Cornell 2001) and *Autobiographics* (Cornell 1994). She has published widely in scholarly journals and numerous edited collections. She is currently Visiting Professor of English at The Ohio State University and a Visiting Scholar of Gender Studies at the Pembroke Center at Brown University. Her public feminist scholarship appears in *The Conversation*, *Public Books*, and *WBUR's Cognoscenti* and she is a frequent analyst of the #MeToo movement.

**Paulina Dominik (Freie Universität Berlin) - May 5, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)**

TITLE:

*Echo of the Journey and Adventures of My Life: Salomea Pilsztynowa – the Peripatetic Polish Ophthalmologist in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Empire – and Her Unusual Memoir (1760)*

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Born in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (today's Belarus), Salomea Pilsztynowa (1718 – after 1763) arrived on the Bosphorus in 1735 as a young bride accompanying her physician husband, Jakub Halpir, who sought his fortune as a foreign doctor among the Istanbul elite. In the Ottoman capital, she learnt the craft of medicine from her husband and others, and set up her own medical practice, specializing in ophthalmology. At the height of her career, in 1759, she was a physician in the imperial harem of Sultan Mustafa III. We learn about Pilsztynowa's fascinating life from her memoir entitled *Echo of the journey and adventures of my life* that she compiled in Polish in Istanbul in 1760 and that is an unusual piece of evidence of the life of a woman in the eighteenth century. Her narrative takes the reader on an unprecedented journey stretching from St. Petersburg in the North, to Kiev in the East, to Istanbul and Sofia in the South and to Vienna and Wrocław in the West. Focusing on Pilsztynowa's astonishing account narrating the ups and downs of her peripatetic career as a medical practitioner, this presentation portrays her in various roles – as a skilful self-taught eye doctor, wife, mother, traveller, and above all as an independent, entrepreneurial woman. It examines how by casting aside the traditional roles assigned to a woman by the eighteenth century society, Pilsztynowa was not only capable of adapting to the new world, but also of domesticating it, and how in this process, by turning her otherness to her own advantage, she carved for herself a professional niche, and the foreign and distant Ottoman Empire became a space of opportunity and safe abode for her.

BIO:

Paulina Dominik is a Doctoral Fellow at the Graduate School of Global Intellectual History at the Freie- and Humboldt Universität in Berlin. Her PhD dissertation is a global biography of Seyfeddin Thadée Gasztowtt (1881 – 1936) - a French-Polish peripatetic transimperial activist, who in the first two decades of the twentieth century sought to connect the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire and its former provinces in North Africa, and his Polish compatriots in favour of a common struggle against the Eurocentric imperialist global status quo. Dominik was awarded her BA (2012) and MSt (2013) in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford. In 2013-2014, she was based at the Orient-Institut Istanbul where she held a fellowship and since has occasionally contributed to the 'Istanbul Memories: Personal Narratives of the Late Ottoman Period' project. She is the editor of *The Istanbul Memories in Salomea Pilsztynowa's Diary "Echo of the Journey and Adventures of My Life" (1760)* published by the OII in 2017 in the scope of the series *Memoria. Fontes minores ad Historiam Imperii Ottomanici pertinentes*.

**Efthymia Kanner (University of Athens) - May 26, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)**

TITLE:

Self-narratives, gendered middle class subjectivities and feminism(s) in the “Orient” from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Interwar Period

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

In this presentation, I will try to reconstitute the gendered middle class subjectivities of some women who lived in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Early Turkish Republic from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Interwar period and link these subjectivities to the emergence of feminist thought in the region. I draw on those women’s correspondence as well as the autobiographies, novels and essays they wrote. I will examine these texts as self-narratives and point out the way they became for their authors tools for challenging the existent social hierarchies and demanding more egalitarian gender relations in the public and private sphere. In other words I wonder to what extent feminism, as criticism towards the existing social order, was based on gendered middle class subjectivities stemming from the Enlightenment and Romanticism, common tools of thought for literate populations of various ethno- religious origins in “the Orient”. I will focus on Sotiria Kleomenous-Aliberti (1847-1929), a Greek intellectual and first sub-headmistress of Zappeion Greek Orthodox Girls’ School in Istanbul, while comparing her with Fatma Aliye (1862-1936), Halide Edib Adivar (1884-1964) and Nezihe Muhittin (1889-1958), prominent Turkish Muslim intellectuals of the time.

BIO:

Efi Kanner is Assistant Professor of Turkish Culture and Society in the Department of Turkish and Modern Asian Studies of the University of Athens. She graduated from the History and Archaeology Department of the Athens University. She was awarded a *Diplôme d’Études Approfondies (D.E.A.)* by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and a PhD from the University of Athens. Her research interests cover the social history of the Late Ottoman Empire and Turkey including microhistory, the history of education and philanthropy, the history of gender relations, and the history of social movements. Her previous research related to various aspects of *embourgeoisement*, mainly among Orthodox and Moslem populations in the late Ottoman period and Early Turkish Republic. Her last researches concern the gendered aspects of Turkish modernization and especially Turkish movement against gender-based violence and its political dimensions.

**Nova Robinson (Seattle University - June 2, 2021, 20.00 - 21.00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3))**

TITLE:

Recording Feminist History: Anbara Salam Khalidi's Memoir

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Anbara Salam Khalidi's memoir provides an intimate portrait of the bonds of friendship and solidarity that helped sustain the early Arab feminist movement. Using Khalidi's memoir *Jawla fil dhikrayāt bayna Lubnān wa filisṭīn* (Tour of Memories between Lebanon and Palestine, 1978) as its source, this lecture highlights the many forces that shaped Khalidi's feminism, including her religious upbringing, her educational experiences, her regional and international travels, and her friendships with other early feminist thinkers, such as Julia Dimashqiyya and Ibtihaj Qaddura. Anbara was born to a well-connected Sunni Muslim family in Beirut. Her father represented Beirut in the Ottoman Parliament. In her early teens, she started to write for Arabic language journals and women's periodicals about women's liberation and national independence. She founded *Jam'iyyat Yaqqat al-Fatāt al-'Arabiyya* (Association for the Awakening of Young Arab Women) in 1914. After the war she traveled to England with her family, where, as she writes in her memoir, she was exposed to a model of women's political and social emancipation. When she returned to Lebanon, she removed her face veil at a public event, which caused quite a stir in Beirut society. In 1929, she married the principal of the Arab College in Jerusalem. The family lived in Jerusalem until 1948, when they were forced to return to Lebanon. Throughout her memoir, Khalidi records how a pioneering generation of Arab feminists built connections with one another and with feminists in other world regions in order to support the cause of Arab, and later Palestinian, independence. Her memoir offers a unique window into the origins and evolution of the women's movement in the Eastern Mediterranean. Her memoir was translated by her son, the historian Tarif Khalidi and is available in English under the title *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi* (Pluto Press, 2013).

BIO:

Nova Robinson is an Associate Professor of History and International Studies at Seattle University. She is also affiliated with the Women and Gender Studies program. Her research is situated at the intersection of women's history, Middle Eastern history, and the history of international governance. Her manuscript *Truly Sisters: Arab Women and International Women's Rights* is under review for publication. She is also co-editor with Bonnie G. Smith of the *Routledge Global History of Feminism*. Recent articles have been published in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, the *Arab Studies Journal*, and the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. Her research has been supported by several fellowships and grants, including a Fulbright. She received her PhD in Women's History from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in 2015 and her AB in History *cum laude* from Dartmouth College in 2008.

**Julia Phillips Cohen (Vanderbilt University)- June 9, 2021, 20.00 - 21:00 (Turkish Time, GMT+3)**

TITLE:

In Search of Late Ottoman Sephardi Women's Lives

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Although the field of Ottoman women's and gender history has expanded significantly in recent decades, there is still much we don't know about the lives of Ottoman Jewish women at the dawn of the modern era. Among the questions that remain are those surrounding the extent of Ottoman Jewish women's autonomy—whether, when, and in which contexts they had the space to forge their own paths in life, to marry for love, to pursue their own professional interests, or achieve financial independence. Unlike scholars who have productively mined Jewish women's oral traditions and autobiographical writings for later, post-Ottoman periods, those working on earlier eras find first-person accounts left behind by Ottoman Jewish women only rarely, and with great difficulty. Yet this need not deter us from asking these questions. Even those who did not leave behind memoirs or personal correspondence have left us other bread crumbs—in the advertisements they placed in the press, in the businesses they registered, the lesson plans they created, the photographs they posed for and kept, the portraits they had commissioned, the songs they recorded, and the pieces of clothing they designed, cut, and sewed, leaving us with a wealth of textual and material traces. This talk will pursue a few such cases, offering selected portraits of little known late Ottoman Sephardi women.

BIO:

Julia Phillips Cohen is Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and History at Vanderbilt University. She has authored two books, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford, 2014), and *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950* (Stanford, 2014). Her articles have appeared in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *American Historical Review*, *Jewish Social Studies*, *Jewish Quarterly Review* and *AJS Perspectives*. She is currently beginning a new project exploring the working lives of Sephardi Jewish women in the late Ottoman Empire and beyond.