

Plaques for Women: London's Highgate Neighborhood, Pink Historical Plaques, and the Politics
of Feminism and Inclusion in History

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Upon first glance, the London neighborhood Highgate smacks of a finely-aged suburban posh. Getting off at the Highgate tube stop, along with three other members of my undergraduate course traveling to London to investigate the city's 'history' in different neighborhoods, I took in the cues that suggested Highgate was indeed the wealthy, 'suburban' community that we had expected to find. The streets were like miniature arboretums, curving and jutting up and down the hill for which this neighborhood is famous. Across the cultural barriers of our own Americanness and the 'Britishness' of this space, I recognized the codes of class and social standing that Highgate's streets communicated, albeit in a stale, mossy elegance—the kind of neighborhood, with its limited diversity of architecture and large trees, that has keenly curated itself, but whose standards of taste and prominence are a bit outmoded.

In terms of aesthetics, however, the neighborhood's 'oldness' only bolstered its visual appeals to exclusivity. A conversation with Susan Trackman, an archivist at the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution (HLSI), confirmed Highgate's larger adoption of exclusive, elitist narratives about its past and present.¹ In past centuries, Highgate has been a respite for the wealthy from London's urban maelstrom—a village that was gradually subsumed into London's larger urban corpus, though the extent to which this 'village' is indeed part of London is an evolving and not entirely answered question. Presently, Highgate continues its tradition of attracting the socially powerful and well-to-do, but, as Susan Trackman remarked, Highgate's current residents are now more known for being Nobel Prize-winning scientists or famous artists like George Michael rather than being part of an aristocratic elite.² Whether accurate or exaggerated, Highgate's sense of exclusivity is predicated on the notion that the stalwart village

¹ Susan Trackman, in-person interview by author, March 5, 2020.

² Susan Trackman, in-person interview by author, March 5, 2020.

has a humbly famous and brilliant population, whether buried in Highgate’s cemetery or living in its quaint streets—such that, according to Trackman, one can often wait in line with multiple Nobel Laureates at once in a grocery store.³

Exclusivity is perhaps Highgate’s most explicitly conveyed sense of its own identity, at least in my impressions from having visited the neighborhood and culled its reputation from a smattering of historical and cultural sources that reference Highgate. Highgate is not only exclusive in the sense that it foregrounds understated elitism in its self-presentation, but also in its community’s attempts at quaintness and *uniqueness* within London and Britain. Among the more ‘unique’ elements of Highgate’s visual communication of its specialness are its pink plaques commemorating ‘remarkable’ women who have lived in, worked in, or paid memorable visits to Highgate in the past several hundred years.

These *pink* historical plaques are in direct conversation with the larger scheme of *blue* plaques in London—a project of history and memory that Liberal M.P. William Ewart proposed to Parliament in 1863, to protect London’s ‘historic’ buildings by increasing “‘the public estimation for places which have been the abodes of *men* who have made England what it is’” (emphasis added).⁴ According to Anna Eavis and Howard Spencer—both of whom are currently involved in the process of accepting, reviewing, and approving nominations for blue plaques—these plaques have been an indispensable part of London’s and, indeed, Britain’s historical consciousness from the project’s inception. The blue plaques’ beloved, iconic status for Londoners is as fresh as ever, at least among the curious and historically-minded walking

³ Susan Trackman, in-person interview by author, March 5, 2020.

⁴ “Statement by the Society of Arts,” 1866, quoted in Emily Cole, *Lived in London: Blue Plaques and the Stories Behind Them*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 5.

London's streets.⁵ Such a visible and public form of historical memory—tied at once to biography, architecture, and public space—has a *gendered* history, evidenced currently in the fact that only 14% of London's blue plaques represent women.⁶

From the start, the process of finding candidates for blue plaques was gendered in men's favor, since men were the primary, if not the exclusive, actors in nineteenth-century Western paradigms of what constituted 'history.' Feminist historian Natalie Zemon Davis finds that, though some women did make it into the historical record, these were typically the 'Women Worthies,' whose accomplishments were recorded in biographies that proved their place as exceptions to the rule of men's dominance over the public spheres of politics, academics, and culture.⁷ Pointing out these 'Women Worthies' emphasized women's position as potential and unfulfilled public actors, and historical literature on 'Women Worthies' often neglected to offer any significant investigation of female/male 'sex roles' or the politics of women's sexuality, sex-gender identity, fluidity within sex-gender identity, or gender cooperation with men.⁸

Billie Melman, another feminist historian, discusses the historical context within which new notions of an identifiable 'women's past' emerged in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western historical discourse. Like Natalie Zemon Davis, Melman emphasizes historians' attributions of historical worthiness within the category of 'woman'—stratifications between 'women' and 'great women,' the latter hewing more closely to the nineteenth-century British

⁵ Hannah Jane Parkinson, "The Quirkier, the Better: Why Blue Plaques Lift My Spirits," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2019.

⁶ Anna Kessel, "Where Are All the Blue Plaques for London's Women?" *The Guardian*, October 2, 2018. Also see Allison Vale, *A Woman Lived Here: Alternative Blue Plaques, Remembering London's Remarkable Women* (London: Robinson, 2018).

⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," 86.

ideals of masculinity, public presence, and the ““world-historical man.””⁹ Among male politicians and historians, the impetus for the gradual inclusion of women in the franchises of political and historical action—primarily in suffrage but also in the emerging academic profession of history—was to secure their participation in nation- and empire-strengthening.¹⁰ Despite this general trend toward folding women more actively into nationalist and imperialist projects through representation in ‘history,’ female historians in the early twentieth century took history into their own hands, with new contributions to historiography that differentiated women’s history from the larger body of historical discourse.¹¹ Two main approaches to women’s past emerged, in Melman’s estimation: an *integrative* memory, which sought to accomplish nationalist and imperialist goals by including women in history, and a *relativist* memory, which privileged emphasizing sex-gender difference in historical accounts and rejected conventional political motivations.¹² As Melman highlights, *women* have largely been the ones doing the work of recovering and representing women’s history and memory, often as a separate sub-discipline of history outside of men’s political motivations.

Recent activity among British women historians has celebrated women historians’ work in crafting narratives and making contributions to historical research that have not always received adequate recognition. The Institute for Historical Research at the University of London held a conference on “London’s Women Historians”¹³ in 2017, during which female historians of

⁹ Billie Melman, “Gender, History, and Memory: The Invention of Women’s Past in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *History and Memory* 5, no. 1 (1993): 19.

¹⁰ Billie Melman, “Gender, History, and Memory: The Invention of Women’s Past in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 23.

¹¹ Billie Melman, “Gender, History, and Memory: The Invention of Women’s Past in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 27.

¹² Billie Melman, “Gender, History, and Memory: The Invention of Women’s Past in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 34.

¹³ “London’s Women Historians,” School of Advanced Study: University of London, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://archives.history.ac.uk/womenhistorians/index.html>.

London's past remembered their forebears—particularly in a vanguard of women historians at the University of Cambridge—and discussed the current state of women's representation in the professions of history, citing a recent study that details how sexual harassment, bullying, and overwork can interrupt or derail many women's careers as professional academic historians.¹⁴ Women who aspire to be historians have often worked in and still study the fields of local and family history, as Joan Thirsk notes.¹⁵ Such historical work was often a subversive means of representing women's lives outside of the metropolitan, national, or imperial schemes that privileged men's history in larger political contexts.

The planning, development, and installation of pink plaques in Highgate was a process that foregrounded not only women's lives in Highgate's past, but also negotiated the borders of the local and the national, the city and the neighborhood, and the 'history' that communities preserve in their own public spaces—all through the lenses of female historians, activists, and artists from Highgate. These historians, activists, and artists from Highgate sought to "reclaim pink and the past" with their Pink Plaque Project, which grew out of historical research by the HLSI on women's lives in Highgate.¹⁶ In June 2019, the Pink Plaque Project unveiled 23 plaques celebrating women at the Highgate Festival, an annual event to "celebrate neighbourhood and community."¹⁷ The Pink Plaque Project's aims to reclaim the past and include the women who were and are "movers and shakers" in the community intersects with Highgate's broader exclusivity. Within larger feminist efforts over the past centuries to include more women in

¹⁴ Nicola Miller et al., "Promoting Gender Equality in U.K. History: A Second Report and Recommendations for Good Practice," *Royal Historical Society*, November 6, 2018.

¹⁵ Joan Thirsk, "Women Local and Family Historians," in *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History*, ed. David Hey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 174.

¹⁶ Alicia Pivaro, email interview, April 22, 2020.

¹⁷ "Highgate Festival," Highgate Festival, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://highgatefestival.org/about-us/>.

political and historical institutions, this kind of inclusion within exclusive spaces is part of our current culture of demanding fair and appropriate representation of marginalized lives and identities in cultural, political, and historical discourses that themselves only include small numbers of history-worthy women and men.

The Pink Plaque Project foregrounded its own qualifications for representing women in Highgate's history, including the stipulation that the women must have "challenged society's ideas" in some way.¹⁸ This qualification likely responds to the blue plaques' requirement that a nominee must have made a "positive contribution" to society, a requirement that has received criticism not only for its gendered implications but also for its moral and political judgments of what it means to 'contribute' meaningfully to society.¹⁹ Unlike the blue plaque scheme, the Pink Plaque Project makes explicit its moral and political bias—toward women who advocated for women and supported 'feminist' approaches to culture and politics. The Pink Plaque Project is also an intentionally *local* historical affair, produced by women who live in Highgate and rooted in the cultural context of Highgate's high-brow community.

Several other Highgate-based feminist projects culminated in the Pink Plaque Project. Catharine Wells, the head archivist at the HLSI, conducted research into women's history in Highgate in her 'Remarkable Women of Highgate' project, which in turn inspired the 'Women's Only' art exhibition at the Highgate Contemporary Art Gallery in 2018.²⁰ Ten female artists selected ten different women from Wells' research to represent in artistic media, including painting, sculpture, and photography. Artists Elizabeth Hannaford and Maria Kramer represented

¹⁸ Alicia Pivaro, email interview, April 22, 2020.

¹⁹ Anna Eavis and Howard Spencer, "Risk and Reputation: The London Blue Plaques Scheme," in *Dethroning Historical Reputations: Universities, Museums, and the Creation of Benefactors* (London: University of London Press, 2018), 112.

²⁰ Alicia Pivaro, email interview, April 22, 2020.

explorer Mary Kingsley and philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, respectively, in paintings of specimens Kingsley retrieved from traveling different parts of the British Empire and semi-abstract wire sculptures of Burdett-Coutts' likeness.²¹ Such an artistic origin for the Pink Plaque Project engages a complex set of sexual political symbolism(s) of the dialogue between architecture, art, and biography in making private histories public on city streets, whether through blue or pink plaques.²² The Women's Only exhibition was part of what Alicia Pivaro—one of the organizers and leaders of both the exhibition and the Pink Plaque Project—calls a broader “intentional provocation” of what society deems ‘important’ in history and historical memory.²³

Like other feminist reclamations and revisions of the past, the Pink Plaque Project has provoked controversy over its own ways of representing women and women's history. Most of the criticism has centered on the project's choice of the color pink for its plaques—a color that some outspoken British feminists think undermines the project's intentions by reinforcing negative feminine stereotypes.²⁴ The controversy over Highgate's pink plaques was a minor issue in what has become a larger debate among feminists about the low representation of women in blue plaques and how best to address that gender disparity in one of London's most beloved historical institutions. From 2018 through 2020, articles discussing women's representation in blue plaques have appeared in British newspapers like *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, and *The*

²¹ See Appendix A for images of Hannaford's and Kramer's work.

²² Lilian Chee, “An Architecture of Twenty Words: Intimate Details of a London Blue Plaque House,” in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (New York: Routledge, 2005).

²³ Alicia Pivaro, email interview, April 22, 2020.

²⁴ See Xantha Leatham, “Feminists See Red Over Pink Plaques Meant to Honor the Lives of Important Women, Claiming the Colour Reinforces Damaging Stereotypes,” *Daily Mail*, February 22, 2019; and Adebola Lamuye et al., “Feminists See Red Over Plan for Pink Plaques to Honor Famous Women,” *Evening Standard*, February 22, 2019.

Evening Standard.²⁵ Most reiterate the language of inclusion that calls on the British public to send more nominations for women to English Heritage, the historical organization that runs the blue plaque scheme. An op-ed by *Telegraph* commentator Jemima Lewis, however, contends that the public should *not* support including women in the blue plaques, since doing so would erase the absence of women in historical representations over the past centuries and decades—an absence that Lewis finds to be a patriarchal monument not worth hiding from view by adding women to what has largely been a men’s institution.²⁶ Despite such a call to work outside the system to include and represent more women in ‘history,’ the blue plaque scheme has met the moment by pushing for more nominations in a new campaign, “Plaques for Women,” that recalls the language of suffrage and the question of women’s inclusion in the franchises of the vote, citizenship, and government representation.

The Pink Plaque Project offers another path for representing history—outside of institutions like English Heritage’s blue plaque scheme that have exclusive histories. Highgate’s local feminist artists, activists, and historians have worked outside the ‘system’ to produce a distinct way of representing women’s history that navigates a liminal space between public and private, local and national, suburban and metropolitan, ways of remembering ‘history.’ Beneath both the Pink Plaque Project and the blue plaque scheme, however, is an air of exclusivity not due to tensions of space or gender, but within *history* itself. Selecting which women and men from Highgate’s, or London’s, or Britain’s, past(s) merit recognition in such a permanent and

²⁵ See Mark Brown, “English Heritage Calls for More Female Blue Plaque Nominees,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2018, and “New Blue Plaques for Women Honor Spies, Artist and Suffragettes,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2020.

²⁶ Jemima Lewis, “The Feminists at English Heritage Can’t Rewrite History with a Few Blue Plaques,” *The Telegraph*, March 6, 2020.

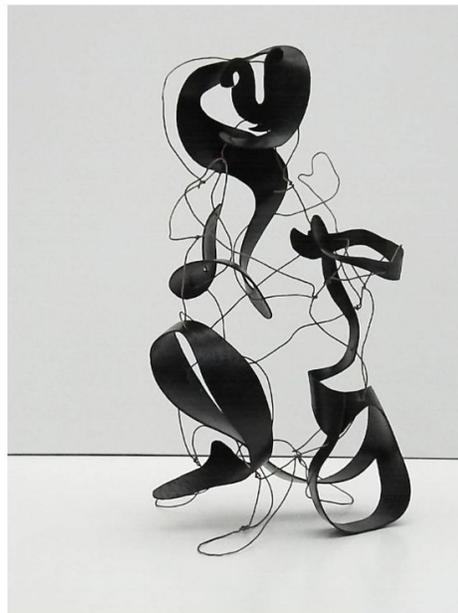
public form of historical memory necessitates narratives of history that include only the most ‘important’ and visible actors.

‘History’, like Highgate, is a curated and necessarily exclusive space that has taken centuries to form into whatever some might recognize it as today—an imagined metropolis of sorts with faces, names, discourses, places, and identities that a select few get to populate. Remembering women *is* an important and worthy historical endeavor, and both the Pink Plaque Project and the blue plaque scheme offer routes to inclusion. Historical inclusion in these cases, however, is happening in exclusive spaces and in histories with their own exclusive histories. The contextual dissonances between exclusive realities and inclusive efforts in spaces that tell ‘history’ out loud are fruitful for addressing broader ‘binary’ tensions of gender, region, class, and other stratifications in history and historical memory.

Appendix A



Sculpture: Self Critical
Material: Copper Wire.



Sculpture: Inside Out
Material: Copper Wire, DPM

Maria Kramer (2018)



'Boxed In (Kingsleyae Beetle)'
Oil on unprimed linen,
4 panels each 20 x 20 x 3cm



'Kingsleyae Fish I'
(dead eyes crossing time, mouth soft open)
Oil on canvas
2 panels each 40 x 20 x 2.5cm



'Kingsleyae Fish II'
Oil/grit on canvas
40 x 40 x 3cm

Maria Kramer (2018)

Elizabeth Hannaford (2018)

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