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Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis

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Almost twenty years ago, in a little noticed paper for an American Council of Learned Societies conference, historian of American slavery Barbara Jeanne Fields went on record as an abiding skeptic of “categories of analysis.” “The phrase itself—categories of analysis—has a dry, ugly sound to my ears,” she confided. “When I encounter the phrase ... in the opening pages of a book that I am not professionally obligated to read, I put the book down immediately.” “If not kept strictly in their place,” she cautioned, “they get above themselves and go masquerading as persons, mingling on equal terms with human beings and sometimes crowding them out altogether.”¹

Of course Fields wrote partly (not entirely) tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless, when I first came across the piece in the early 1990s, I was dismayed. At the time, the project of consciously and carefully delineating categories of historical analysis—race, class, nation, identity and, in my field, gender—promised an ever more nuanced history of power and resistance, one in which subjects that had been unseen or rendered unintelligible by the terms of older frameworks would become visible in dramatically new and significant ways. Like many others, I thought not simply the future of my field but its vindication as a field lay in that project and I was disappointed to find a historian I admired as much as Fields demurring at the prospect.

Now, twenty years later, my enthusiasm for categories of analysis has cooled, including and perhaps particularly my enthusiasm for gender as a category of analysis.² What I worry about—what gives Fields’ essay its current salience for me—is my sense that her complaints describe very well the way gender has come to function as category of analysis in women’s and gender history. The term “gender” has never been trouble-free in our work: we have struggled with limited success to articulate its relation to bodies, for example, and to understand whether it is necessarily binary in structure. Most problematic in my own mind is our failure to investigate the very local and partial character of the concept—*local* to modern Western culture and inexact even within that scope. Claiming the concept as a category of analysis not only has done nothing to resolve those issues, but has, in my view, magnified their problematic reach by investing the concept with a broader and more universal authority. Although I am constantly instructed and often dazzled by my colleagues’ and my students’ work, as a field, we seem stuck in (stuck with?) a definition of “gender” that is historically and culturally quite specific. Far from eliminating that provinciality, claiming gender as a broad category of analysis has secreted the concept’s biases, flattened the potential meanings of our work, and cast a pall of uniformity over the history whose resistances and irregularities we seek to understand.

In a sense, relying on gender as a category of historical analysis has stymied our efforts to write a history of gender as a historical phenomenon. In Fields’ words, as a category of analysis gender now goes rather haughtily “masquerading” as historical subjects, “mingling on equal terms” with historical actors and processes “and sometimes crowding them out altogether.” In the essay that follows, I explore these reservations in greater conceptual and historical detail. I argue that women’s/gender historians will produce a more complex and useable history of “gender” if we understand the concept as unfilled—to be filled by our studies—and thus as a series of

questions always waiting to be answered rather than as a category of historical analysis always to be affirmed.

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It is useful, I think, to begin that discussion by asking just what a category of analysis *is*. How is it constituted, and what work do we expect it to do?

Categories of analysis are *subjective*, fashioned in the critical minds of historians to help us identify, organize and assess certain kinds of evidence of particular interest to us. Thus, although they may carry an urgency for us that makes them appear both natural and inevitable, categories of analysis are always contemporary, constituted in and marked by the present—our present as historians.³ This temporality is by no means a fatal flaw in the usefulness of categories for historians. Quite the contrary, to suggest that categories of analysis exist *a priori* in the sources and have merely to be revealed (like a Michelangelo sculpture imprisoned in the stone) is to misunderstand the character of history as a discipline and to misrepresent the role of the historian as a maker of meaning. But the fact of particularity should give us pause. Categories of analysis are not analytically neutral. The moment we invest any particular category of analysis with the authority of permanence and universality, we cease to be historians and become propagandists of a particular epistemological order.

And yet the very process of categorization—the naming of an abstracted class—is a simplifying, universalizing process. These qualities, too, are a part of the usefulness of categories, the whole purpose of which is to state a framework that will bring order and meaning to an otherwise unruly tangle of data and permit us to hold steady the constant flurry of change. On the other hand, this quality removes categories from “real” time and space and locates them in a type of critical utopia, a deliberate reduction of lived experience to a few arbitrarily chosen elements.

When we use a category of analysis we authorize that process of reduction, with all of its numerous and inevitable concealments and misrepresentations. This does not absolutely preclude us from noticing the anomalies in our field of analysis, but as the episteme of the analysis, the reason-imbuing framework, a category of analysis can mark whatever is beyond it as irrational and nonsensical, an annoyance to be either fitted into the category or purged as irrelevant.

But the anomalies are just what ought to interest us as historians—not so we can figure a way to force them into conformity, but because they may signal that something is being missed or suppressed within the framework. For historians, that “something” is likely to be local practice, the ground of particular, historical time and space that marks the insufficiency of the category’s truth-claims. The anomalies may be quite small (an unexpected combination of symbols) or more glaring (a dramatic exception to the category’s rule). They may turn out to be constitutive of the category, in the sense that the plausibility of any category of analysis resides in part on its power to exclude. Often, however, irregularities point to more fundamental problems in the category itself.

Identifying the practices that are incomprehensible within our framework is hard work—harder the more deeply a category has become ingrained in the practice of the field. A particular category of gender has become the common sense for our work as gender historians. And yet the rewards can be considerable. To paraphrase Bourdieu, only by a break with the categorical vision, “which is experienced as a break with ordinary vision,” can we begin to bring the anomalies into clearer view.⁴

The current “ordinary” understanding of gender as a category of historical analysis originated in the late twentieth-century feminist political mobilization in Europe and the United

States, within which the field of women's history developed as both product and practice.

⁵Although early women's historians were far more likely to employ the category "women" ("women's roles" or "perceptions of women" or "myths about women") than the analytical language of "gender,"⁶ most embraced a concept of gender roughly akin to Gayle's Rubin's classic early formulation: that "in every society" there is "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation [*sex*] is shaped by human, social intervention [*gender*]..."⁷ It was the work of feminism to expose those gender systems and redress their injustices to women (later, to men as well as women). In this context, it was the work of *women's historians* to discover and reveal such patterns in the past (including in the ways historians had written about the past), to return women and women's activities to the historical record and to illuminate the ways in which women in the past had attempted to resist sexual oppression in the societies within which they lived.

Although the distinction between "sex" and "gender" remained common in feminist organizing and history, the framework was not without its critics, especially among theorists who questioned whether even physical bodies were not in some way socially constructed, whether they ever existed apart from culturally fashioned meanings about them. However, in part because the field of women's history originated in the methods of social history, in part because early women's history did not seriously interrogate bodies as a historical subject, most early women's historians did not directly confront the dilemmas of the sex/gender distinction, which continued to inform the assumptions of their work. The period from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s certainly saw a lot of theorizing about "gender" among women's historians, but the emphasis was not on problematizing the term "gender" itself so much as it was on problematizing the relation of gender to other categories, particularly class and patriarchy.⁸ In many ways potentially very

useful, most efforts of this sort continued to conceptual gender, class, and other social processes as conceptually distinct, making it difficult to capture the complexity and particularity of their unified processes in a given historical circumstance. In the absence of a constitutively “raced” concept of gender, for example, gender always reflected the racial systems of Western culture and reverted to the implicitly white position.

By the 1980s, it was becoming more difficult for women’s historians to avoid re-evaluating the way they used the concept “gender.” Although the fuller investigation of these points would follow in theorizing “intersectionality” and in the studies of gender and colonialism of the 1990s, scholars of race and slavery in Europe and the Americas were vigorous in pointing out that the bodies of women of color had been socially constructed to meet the interests of Europeans since the first colonial contacts.⁹ “Stand point” theory, which questioned the adequacy of generalized and abstracted categories for capturing the distinctive processes of forms of oppression and privilege in a woman’s experience, was one response to these criticisms of mainstream feminist analysis.¹⁰

Several additional circumstances specific to the academy in the 1980s gave urgency to the quest for a more deeply theorized concept of gender in the field of women’s history. The field was thriving. By the 1980s it supported influential journals in the United States and Europe, and works in women’s history were beginning to appear on the lists of prominent publishers and in prominent general historical journals. The sheer volume of production seemed to require some greater consistency of terms. In the academy, both the legitimacy of the field of women’s history—and of its practitioners—was under almost constant attack within the profession. In particular, women’s history was dismissed as narrow, over-specialized and immaterial to the truly important matter of history, and women’s historians were accused of trying to fashion their own

personal frustrations into a respected academic field. A more unified concept of gender, detached from the heat of activism and justified instead as one of the fundamental organizing principles of history elevated to the purely intellectual realm of a category of analysis, might provide legitimacy for the field and its practitioners.

Here entered the matter of the “category of analysis.” If gender could be argued to be a key field of experience for both men and women—for *all* people—then one might posit gender as a subject of universal relevance. This was the political context for Joan W. Scott’s splendid essay, “Gender: A Useful Concept of Historical Analysis,” which opened the December 1986 issue of the American Historical Review, a commanding placement in a prestigious conservative journal. As Scott noted, “The proliferation of case studies in women’s history seems to call for some synthesizing perspective” and “the discrepancy between the high quality of recent work in women’s history and the continuing marginal status of the field as a whole ... points up the limits of descriptive approaches that do not address dominant disciplinary concepts...in terms that can shake their power and perhaps transform them.”¹¹

The broad purpose of the article was to examine the implications of feminists’ growing tendency “to use ‘gender’ as a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes,” and to offer a “useable theoretical formulation” of gender as a category of historical analysis.¹² Scott devoted the first half of the essay to an assessment of the main schools of feminist theorizing in the 1960s and 1970s—all of which seemed to her “limited at best because they tend to contain reductive or overly simple generalizations that undercut not only history’s disciplinary sense of the complexity of social causation but also feminist commitments to analyses that will lead to change.”¹³ Patriarchal theory claimed universal primacy for gender as an analytical category (with little attention to its relationship to other oppressions) and assumed

“a consistent or inherent meaning” for the physical differences between males and females; it rendered history “in a sense, epiphenomenal, providing endless variations on the unchanging theme of a fixed gender inequality.”¹⁴ Marxist theories suffered from something of the opposite problem: they had trouble formulating any independent analytical status for gender at all. Everything was “the by-product of changing economic structures.”¹⁵ Although her specific criticisms of different schools of psychoanalytic theory varied, Scott found in all of them “the tendency to reify subjectively originating antagonism between males and females” and “to universalize the categories and relationship of male and female.”¹⁶ The ability of the field to define its own boundaries and at the same time to challenge “non-feminist historians” depended on “gender as an analytic category.”¹⁷ The challenge was to formulate a concept of gender that could be used as an independent category of analysis yet rejected “the fixing of the binary opposition of male and female as the only possible relationship and as a permanent aspect of the human condition.”¹⁸

The category Scott herself offered did not resolve these issues, however. Although much of the article was devoted to criticisms of the inadequacies of specific social scientific methodologies for the historical study of gender, Scott did not reject the social science model *per se*. Finding that gender theorizing “is often not done precisely or systematically,”¹⁹ she fashioned her definition on the model of a scientific claim, with the implications of neutrality and universality implied by that form: gender had two parts and four subparts, identifiable and structurally consistent (although with some operational variation).²⁰

Far from dislodging the binary, the first part of the definition restated it: “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes.”²¹ This approach complicated the “sex/gender distinction” by deflecting analysis from the

naturalized body to the *perceived* body, but this was a deflection, not a displacement, for perception now became the real subject. If people *perceive* male and female bodies as oppositional and fixed in a binary—which seemed to be what Scott meant when she paraphrased Bourdieu to the effect that “[e]stablished as an objective set of references, concepts of gender structure perception and the concrete and symbolic organization of all social life”²²—then the question of reproductive bodies becomes irrelevant, since gender is as much hard-wired in the human psyche as Freud would have had it hard-wired in the human anatomy. Scott did offer a theory of change. The four subparts to her first proposition (culturally available symbols, normative concepts that interpret those symbols, politics and social institutions and organizations that structure these normative concepts in daily life, and subjective identity) operate simultaneously but with changing and culturally distinct intensities.²³ None of them, however, altered the fundamental binary structure of gender itself. Gender history would be the story of their complex and altering interplay, variations on an enduring configuration of gender.

Scott’s second proposition provided that “gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power.” As became clear in her discussion of this proposition, the power Scott was interested in, and which she understood gender to signify, was the power of domination and subordination: “differential control over or access to material and symbolic resources.”²⁴ The emphasis here on differentiability as a characteristic of power derived from the oppositional binarity of gender, but it also, in turn, defined and limited the concept of gender, which, thus defined, could not operate other than as a vehicle of this type of power. What game theorists call a “Pareto improvement”—a deployment of power that benefits one site without disadvantaging others—is largely unthinkable within this framework, or is, at best, naïve and perhaps delusional, in much the same way that

claims to individual freedom are delusional within the cultural theory of the Frankfurt School, to whom Scott is much indebted.

One way of reading this definition of gender as a category of analysis is, of course, that if the perceptions of male and female bodies in a given historical circumstance are *not* perceptions of binary difference and/or do not function as vehicles of domination, then the process under study is *not* gender. I'll return to this later. Let me just note here that such a definition of gender relegates evidence of cultures not characterized by the oppositional binary to a strange negative historical and intellectual space, as *the non-gendered Other*—the absence of a Western gender formation adding to their strangeness rather than raising questions of the adequacy of the Western category.

Powerful and timely, “Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis” was soon being cited everywhere, albeit often without the critical reading the essay deserved. Scott herself returned to these matters in several subsequent essays—most importantly the 1999 “Some More Reflections on Gender and Politics” in which she reconsidered or sought to clarify certain arguments of the earlier piece. Seeming to recognize the problems with “categories of analysis,” she adjured “the idea (inherent in the notion of gender as a “category”) that there is anything fixed or known in advance about the terms ‘men’ and ‘women’ and the relationship between them” and called upon women’s historians to “take [gender] to be a changing and complex social and psychological phenomena.” “If sex, gender, and sexual difference are effects—discursively and historically produced—,” she argued, “then we cannot take them as points of origin for our analysis.” And yet qualities of Western universalism inhabit that essay as well (for example, in the heavy reliance on Freud). Moreover, although Scott insists that we interrogate how the terms man and woman are being used in specific historical contexts, there are clear limits to the

possibilities. She suggests that the questions we need to ask are: “How do laws, rules, and institutional arrangements refer to and implement differences between the sexes? In what terms? How have different societies organized gender relationships? In what terms?” But she disregards questions of the first order: “*Do* laws, rules, and institutional arrangement refer to and implement differences between the sexes? *If so*, in what terms? *Have* different societies organized gender relationships?” Perhaps for this reason, perhaps because women’s historians remain under the influence of the first essay and find it easy simply to invoke Scott’s name, “Reflections” seems not to have provoked the “critical reassessment, if not revision and reconceptualization, of the terms that have been most used in our analysis,” as Scott hoped.²⁵

A number of non-Western historians argue that not all societies have been organized on the basis of gender, at least not “gender” in the way implied in the work of most Western historians. Among the most outspoken scholars on the subject is African historian Oyèrónké Oyewùmí. In “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” Oyewùmí argues that Western work on gender has been and continues to be preoccupied with the oppositionally-sexed body, which—as literal body or as representation—inhabits the category “gender” and invests it with a rigid corporeal determinism. But this valorization of the body is not universal, she argues. To the contrary, it is historically specific to Western cultures and Western history. Here Oyewùmí takes the step clearly implied in Western social constructionist thought, but seldom taken by Western social constructionists:

If gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space. If gender is a social construction, then we must examine the various cultural/architectural sites where it was constructed, and we must acknowledge that

variously located actors (aggregates, groups, interested parties) were part of the construction. We must further acknowledge that if gender is a social construction, then there was a specific time (in different cultural/architectural sites when it was “constructed” and therefore a time before which it was not. Thus, gender, being a social construction, is also a historical and cultural phenomenon.

“Consequently,” she concludes, “it is logical to assume that in some societies, gender construction need not have existed at all.”²⁶

Unsurprisingly, Oyewùmí’s work evokes strong reactions. What might it mean to insist that “gender” construction did not occur at all in some societies? Perhaps understandably, given the modern Western paradigm, many historians consider the conceptual alternatives to be either silly or, at best, profoundly naïve, and we confuse an argument for a different concept of gender with an argument for a society of peace and perfect equality. Oyewùmí’s claims are actually much more modest. What she is refusing is specifically the modern, Western category of gender. For her, a society in which “gender” was never constructed means simply a society in which perceptions of sexual difference are “not always enlisted as the basis for social classification.” In pre-colonial Yoruba culture, according to Oyewùmí, the *primary* principle of social classification was seniority, which, she emphasizes, “was based on chronological age... [and] did not denote gender.”²⁷ This does not mean that Yoruba speakers were unaware of the differences between male and female bodies, or that Yoruban culture did not embrace tropes of male and female bodies, or that pre-colonial Yoruba people lived in a golden age in which power was never deployed brutally and for purposes of domination and never articulated through seemingly natural systems of discourse. It means simply that perceptions and representations of sexual opposition were not a *primary* field for the articulation of *that* particular power.

Oyewùmí was not the first to question whether a Western concept of gender is useful as a category of analysis for the history of gender in Africa. In an important 1987 article written just as Scott's category was seizing the imaginations of Western feminists, Ifi Amadiume criticized the ethnocentricity of early feminist anthropology (and, by extension, feminists scholars generally). To these groups, she argued, "the universal social and cultural inferiority of women was a foregone conclusion," but one that derived their failure to recognize that "the domestic/public dichotomy which led them to th[is] conclusion . . . was a feature of their own particular class and culture." In her own work on Igbo culture in eastern Nigeria, Amadiume did identify a gender system through which numerous mythic, social, and culture distinctions were articulated according to a binary of masculine and feminine. But she also found that in this binary the attributes associated with females did not necessarily lead to the economic or political subordination of the social group women, and that various social institutions, especially those of "male daughters" and "female husbands," permitted individual females officially to enter and enjoy the privileges of social positions gendered masculine.²⁸

In the early 1990s, Barry S. Hewlett made a similar argument, this time focusing on misunderstandings of the roles of males as a result of universalizing Western analytical categories. In his work among the Central African Aka, Hewlett found father-infant relations that utterly defied the gender expectations of Western theory—fathers who "spend 47 percent of their day holding or within an arm's reach of their infants," who are gentle, soothing to their infants, and "more likely than [the] mother to hug and kiss the infant."²⁹

Iranian historian Afsaneh Najmabadi returned to the subject of the ethnocentricity of gender as a category of historical analysis in her recent essay "Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Historical Analysis." Like Oyewùmí, Najmabadi worried about the "largely Anglo-

American history of gender as a named category” and about the implications of that history for the use of gender as a category of historical analysis “beyond the Americas and the modern.” She identified as a particular concern the persistence, in the seemingly neutral category, of a gender binary “derived from Western psycho-behavioral categories of gender-role determination,” noting her own struggle with the concept in writing what became Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity:

The project had begun as a project on the work of gender for the formation of Iranian modernity on iconic, narrative, metaphoric, and social levels. But there was another labor of gender that I had overlooked: the production of gender itself as a binary, man/woman—itself an effect of a paradigmatic shift in categories...from a view in which all genders were defined in relation to adult manhood to a view in which woman and man became opposite and complementary, to the exclusion of other categories that would not fit.

Her first “labor of gender” was to break free of the modern, Western category, and of the narrative implicit in that category, in order to tell another story (suppressed within the Western model) of gender as it had existed and functioned in non-modern Iran. That task required acknowledging the “gender binary” as a product of a particular historical moment, not as a universal category. It meant fundamentally “renegotiat[ing] *meanings* of gender and sexuality as well as their *analytic utility*” outside of the epistemological confines of the West.³⁰

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One need not leave the West to encounter the problems posed by using such a culturally specific concept of “gender” as a broad category of historical analysis. Virtually since the beginning of the field, gender/women’s history has been criticized for employing a raced concept

of gender. Figuring the male/female binary as analytically independent, primary and ubiquitous, “gender” as defined by most women’s historians reflected (without naming) the particularity of white women’s experiences. Anticipating the work of scholars like Oyewùmí, Hewlett and Amadiume, Joyce Ladner argued in 1971 that early feminist studies ignored the particularity of African American women’s history, including the evidence that the West African cultures where many American slaves were taken captive had developed patterns of family and kin and understandings of the relation between the male and the female that were different from those the Euro-Americans. Ladner argued that the history of Black women needed to begin with those understandings.³¹

Although the intervening decades have produced a rich and growing scholarship on the history of women of color in the United States, that work remains slight compared to the volumes written on white women. Much of the work that has been done in this area still subordinates the histories of women of color within the histories of white women or, if not of white women *per se*, then within the history of a “white” concept of “gender.” That is to say, until very recently American historians have shown little interest in identifying differences between West African and colonial Euro-American ideas of the social and cultural relations of the male and female, or, for that matter, in according interpretive authority to evidence of differences between African American and Euro-American communities over time in the United States. Of far greater interest has been the status or construction of women of color as negative markers of a Western concept of “gender,” and the pressure on women of color to conform to that concept. To a considerable extent, this centers the story on the Western concept, not on the African American women or on the understandings of gender that may have characterized their communities.³² Until the publication of Jennifer Morgan’s Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World

Slavery in 2004, the central studies of women and race in the colonial period focused on the effects of a Euro-American concept of gender and paid virtually no attention to the likely existence of other, African concepts.³³

In truth, this categorical understanding of gender, which I have been calling “Western” and “modern,” has not worked well even for the history of white women in America. Work on white American women in the late nineteenth century is a particularly striking case in point. From early on in the feminist mobilization, activists looked to the women’s suffrage movement for parallels and antecedents—and found them, especially in that movement as narrated by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Mathilda Gage. The History of Woman Suffrage described a world rigidly divided by a gender binary so privileging of men and penalizing of women that it far superseded other societal inequities in its pervasiveness and harm. Emphasizing the similarities, twentieth-century activists often called their movement “the second wave,” finishing the unfinished business of the presumed “first wave” in suffrage. But rather static frameworks of analysis—derived from politics more than historical inquiry—concealed a much more complicated gender system at the turn of the twentieth century, both within and beyond the suffrage movement (as well as a far more complicated system in the century’s end). As Lisa Tetrault has recently documented, for example, American suffragists were not as embattled as Anthony *et al* implied. Women had long voted in municipal and some state elections. While many state and national legislators opposed broadening the female suffrage, many Americans did not; friendly listeners—including quite a few men—flocked to their lyceum lectures, which furnished some of the suffragists with both celebrity and a fairly nice income.³⁴

Moreover, as historians like Nan Enstad and George Chauncey have shown in different ways, the turn-of-the-century was a period of multiple and quite malleable sexualities. Enstad’s

comments on her use of “subjectivity” as opposed to “identity categories” in Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure captures the importance of that diversity: “Subjectivity is...related to the concepts ‘self’ and ‘identity,’ with a crucial distinction: subjectivity emphasizes a process of becoming that is never completed. It is based on the principle that who one is neither essential nor fixed, but is continually shaped and reshaped in human social exchange.” As she demonstrates, the growth of popular culture at the turn of the century—exactly at the moment when woman suffrage movement was reaching its broadest appeal—provided laboring young women with both forms and fantasies for rearticulating “the female.” The representation of “the lady” that so inspired laboring women, for example, was not a mere pale and envy-riven reflection of “the lady” of elite discourse: it was its own concept.

George Chauncey has identified a varied and complex array of sexualities among urban males, including the “pansy,” the Nance,” the “fairie,” and the “buttercup” as well as “he-men” and “she-men.” Even professional sexologists of the period analyzed the genders into three sexualities: male, female, and intermediate. Although some historians distinguish “sexuality” from “gender,” identifying a gender binary as foundational and sexual varieties as epiphenomenal, work like Enstad’s and Chauncey’s invite us to flip that framework—to understand variation as the rule and normative gender or sexuality as but one expression of that variety.³⁵

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To further illustrate problems in the use of gender as a category of historical analysis, let me turn to my own field of early North American history, a time and a place that brought a Western culture not yet “modern” together with non-Western (and non-modern) indigenous and African diasporic cultures. The early republic in particular is a useful place to begin such a review in part because this was where the field of United States women’s history largely began,

with classics like Carroll Smith Rosenberg's "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman," Kathryn Kish Sklar's Catharine Beecher" and Nancy Cott's The Bonds of Womanhood.³⁶ All of these works sought to understand the origins of the late twentieth century trope of gender in the nineteenth-century "ideology of gender spheres." There was nothing unusual about this. Like all historians, these early women's historians chose to study subjects in the past of continued relevance and interest in the contemporary world. In this case, they focused on elements of social and intellectual life in the early American republic that resonated in the feminist struggle: questions of familial, political, legal and economic subordination of women as a group to men as a group.

That subject continued to organize the field as it developed and reached back into the revolutionary and then the colonial period, with works like Linda Kerber's Women of the Republic, Mary Beth Norton's Daughters of Liberty, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Good Wives. Path-breaking in the richness with which they documented women's experiences in early America, each of these studies understood women's history, as Ulrich put it in an afterword to Good Wives, as "part of a larger movement to reassess and redefine the position of women in the contemporary world."³⁷ In 1988 Linda Kerber commented on the pervasiveness of "separate spheres" as the analytical rubric for writing American women's history. She noted the framework's initial importance as "a strategy that enabled historians to move the history of women out of the realm of the trivial and anecdotal and into the realm of analytical social history." But she also cautioned women's historians that "[t]o continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships."³⁸

Through the 1990s, historians of early American women became more punctilious about identifying “separate spheres” as rhetoric or, later, discourse. Nevertheless, the late twentieth-century Western concept of gender mirrored in that rhetoric—binary, oppositional, presumed primary and universal—became ever more entrenched as the category of analysis for American women’s history before the twentieth century, even when that history dealt (as it must in America) with non-Western people and societies. Newer studies adopted the framework of the late modern category as their own, relentlessly organizing all study of people who happened to be female through the lens of a binary male/female opposition. “Gender” in this work is virtually always assumed to carry late-twentieth century meanings and to have been primary in the lives of historical subjects. Early American gender/women’s historians pay very little attention to the possibility that this concept of gender might not have organized the lives of their subjects—even when their own evidence points toward that conclusion.

I began to think about this in earnest when I attended a conference on “Women’s Economies in Early America.” Presented by some of the most exciting young historians of early US women, many of the papers seemed to me to suggest that being female was of no greater importance, and often of less importance, to the experience and organization of the labor than being a member of a certain family, or living in a certain region, or being a certain age. In other words, the papers seemed to illuminate the relative unimportance of gender in the economic lives of these female people. Yet perhaps because the conference title had already in some degree named the economies as gendered, paper after paper discounted its own evidence in favor of arguments for the separate and distinctive experience of gendered economies.³⁹ In this way, the history of gender in early America has assumed a deeply teleological quality: gender is always what it would become—or would seem to become—by the late twentieth century. Telling that

history is simply a matter of the sifting and winnowing away of various peripheral and minor earlier accoutrements to get to the real stuff.

But if the analytical assumptions about gender in early American historical studies have become predictable, and predictably identifiable as precursors of the late twentieth century, much of the evidence unearthed in those studies (like the papers at the economic conference) resists those assumptions. On even the most superficial level, there is the matter of the multiple identities European females occupied in the colonial era: deputy husbands, masters, workers, heads of household, scientists, and merchants *as well as* wives and mothers.⁴⁰ Although women's historians have tended to dismiss the first cluster as transient and exceptional, there was a continuousness to these roles that belies that simple conclusion.

It's interesting in this regard to contrast treatment of the "deputy husband" in early British North America with the institution of the "female husband" in the pre-colonial Igbo culture studied by Amadiume. The two obviously differed in formal institutional recognition and duration. Unlike a "female husband," a "deputy husband" remained a "wife" in a relationship with a living male. She did not permanently occupy the "husband" role, but assumed his authorities only contingently. No ritual marked her adoption of the role. On the other hand, assuming the role of "deputy husband" was not considered optional for European women in colonial America. As Thomas Fuller put it in 1642, "in her husband's absence, [a woman] is wife and deputy husband."⁴¹ Virtually all Western descriptions of marriage in the early modern period recognized the obligation of the wife as "helpmate" to assist actively in what was formally deemed her husband's estate—an obligation that seemed to have disappeared by the late nineteenth century, when women were no longer expected to understand their husband's financial affairs. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a wife's failure to act aggressively to protect her

husband's interests as she saw them constituted a serious failure of her wifely duties. As Laurel Ulrich observed long ago, the role of deputy husband "reinforced a certain elasticity in pre-modern notions of gender."⁴²

Ulrich concludes that this elasticity remained within the "domestic" boundaries of women's lives. For many women, that was, strictly speaking, accurate—although in many cases those "domestic" boundaries must be construed so broadly to include a given women's activities as to make them virtually meaningless as an analytical tool. Among other things, for example, Elizabeth Meredith of Philadelphia "kept the [family] tannery's account books, borrowed money from the Bank of Pennsylvania,...collected debts from recalcitrant clients," participated in investment decisions, and advised her sons on merchant ventures." Eliza Pinckney of South Carolina managed her father's and her husband's plantations and oversaw the family's trans-Atlantic trade. Judith Sargeant Murray of Massachusetts wrote and published essays critical of the early republic.⁴³

The "exceptions" accumulate like the epicycles of the Ptolemaic universe, until one must ask whether we, like Ptolemy, don't need to change the framework of our assumptions. In searching the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for roots of the nineteenth-century "ideology of gender spheres," perhaps we have missed and/or undervalued the distinctiveness of the earlier. Perhaps we have failed to appreciate a different structuring of the societal and discursive relationship of male and female, more diverse and more fluid, less primary as a performed organization of power and authority. Perhaps rather than aberrations to a fixed "gender" core, this diversity was constitutive of normative adult womanhood.

Studies in virtually every area of social and cultural life—law, politics, family life, the economy, religion⁴⁴—support this more expansive approach to the history of women/gender in

early America, but surely some of the most exciting work has been in the relatively new area of early American sexuality, where the concept of the relentlessly oppositional binary among European immigrants is beginning to receive concerted critical attention. At least since Edmund Morgan put the lie to the stereotype of Puritan sexual prudery, early American historians have documented the robust and varied sexual lives (and fantasies) of the Europeans who came to the Americas.⁴⁵ But until recently historians of American sexuality have tended either to discount the rather extravagant sexual practices of the colonists as exotic exceptions or to treat them as discrete acts that that didn't really measure up to an interiorized "sexuality" at all and certainly did not challenge the rigid binary that held "gender" in its iron grip.

In the important early overview of the history of sexuality in America, Intimate Matters, John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman characterized sexuality in early America as geared entirely toward procreation—what they called "The Reproductive Matrix."⁴⁶ Particularly under the more recent influence of Foucault, scholars since have continued to define sexuality through the particular subjectivities of the bourgeois, regarding sexuality in early America simply as a series of acts of no particular consistency or historical meaning except as and unless they violated early modern prescriptions to be fruitful and multiply. Presumably, sexuality qua sexuality—as a psycho-sensual matrix through which the subject experienced and articulated individuality—did not exist until the bourgeois world of the late nineteenth century. Passions, proclivities, obsessions—all of these were somehow passing aberrations in this approach to early American sexuality. And yet what a lot of them there were! Men with vaginas, women with Devil's teats; cross-dressers, sodomites, passionate same-sex lovers, devotees of bestiality, child-sex, sadomasochism, and, perhaps least common, celibates.⁴⁷

Recent work on early American sexuality—for example, Richard Godbeer’s work on New England and Clare Lyons’ study of sexuality in revolutionary-era Philadelphia—suggests that these presumably aberrant practices (sodomy in Godbeer’s case; “serial non-marital monogamy, self-divorce, and boisterous, bawdy, and public heterosocial sex play” as well as interracial sexual relationships, in Lyons’) may indeed have constituted continuous identities, acknowledged by both the individuals and the communities within which they lived. The history of sexuality, that is to say, may not be from non-sexuality to sexuality, but from a proliferation of sexualities toward a normative binary. Lyons argues explicitly for just this sort of transformation in sexualities at the end of the eighteenth century:

Before the eighteenth century gender...was one among many ordained and fixed hierarchical relationships that ordered society.... The Enlightenment undermined the belief in such natural hierarchies and upset the basis for woman’s subordination to man. A new conceptual framework would be necessary if the gender hierarchy was to be maintained. The response, developed over the eighteenth century, was to reconceptualize gender by positing radical differences between men and women and fixing them in the anatomical body. The creation of binary opposite gendered sexualities was at the core of this new gender system.”⁴⁸

In her view, a male/female oppositional binary existed in the early modern era, but not as a singularly powerful hierarchy. Her book attempts to reconstruct a partial history of the historical creation of that binary as the meaning of gender in the nineteenth century. Godbeer’s recent work, arguing that characteristics of temperament that would be firmly fixed into a sexual opposition by the late antebellum period—“sentiment,” “taste,” “mercy”—were associated with

men as well as women at the turn of the century,⁴⁹ adds to this argument for an important, substantive transition at the turn of the nineteenth-century.

The work of beginning to theorize earlier and different models of gender requires a careful attention to historical specificity of cultural systems. Although historians speak of a “modern Western European culture,” that term, too, is a category of analysis, useful in many respects but also serving to conceal exceptions and suspend differences (within “modern European culture,” one should add, as well as beyond it).⁵⁰ However much it had in common with Great Britain and France, the United States was constituted from colonies. As colonists, subordinate to and disdained by and yet politically and culturally dependent on and tied to an imperial European society, many Euro-Americans suffered an intense sense of inferiority, craving external recognition and valorization, even as they fumed at the visible signs of imperial power and contempt. Had they not rebelled, they would probably have had to become England (psychologically at least) and much of the rhetoric that framed the rebellion and the history of the early republic claimed comfortingly that the United States actually *was* the *true* Britain—Britain cleansed of its corruptions and decadence.

Moreover, these were *settler* colonies. Both the French and the British struggled with the implications of their own slave-holding, but the home nations did not intermingle extensively sexually or culturally with the people they considered “primitive.” They could with some plausibility claim that their bodies—and their cultures—were pure.⁵¹ Not so for white American settlers. They made their homes in a world recognized as “savage” by their parent cultures and they imported hundreds of thousands of additional “savages” to be their slaves. They traded, played, co-habited and bore children with both Native Americans and African people (even as they inflicted long regimes of brutality on both groups) and their cultures were shaped by those

contacts. As the careful (if contradictory) legislating on slave descent suggests, the official delineation of cultures through bodies was of critical practical as well as symbolic importance to white Americans precisely because both their cultures and their bodies were no longer distinct from those of Native and African Americans.

This was the stuff of very complex self-fashioning, drenched in haughtiness and denial. For white Americans, the embrace of a modern trope of gender was part of a historically situated discourse that allowed them to divide the world into natural oppositions that bolstered their own domination even as it redeemed them as the fulfillment of Western civilization.⁵² Herein may lay the answer to Lyons' question and the explanation for why the American Revolution and the founding of the republic appear to loom so large in the history of gender and sexuality in America (as numerous scholars, myself included, have observed).⁵³ Much more than political independence from Great Britain was at stake in this act of national invention. It also functioned as a ritual expunging the corruptions of the national body (and bodies) even as it secured the hierarchies of those bodies within the nation.

But these, or other, conclusions can become available to us only as we begin to theorize gender in early America on its own terms, and not simply as a less developed variant of a late twentieth-century American model. Of course, trying to identify a historically-grounded understanding of the meaning of relationships between the male and the female for early America will carry with it exactly the same potential snares as the use of a concept grounded in a later (and different) culture: the structural concealments, the tendency toward over simplification and generalization, the temptation to flatten anomalies among cultures for the sake of theoretical clarity. In addition, theorizing an early modern category of gender will require us to avoid the seductions of teleology—of assuming we know where we are going. We will need to recognize

varieties of relationships that fell away entirely in the transition to the nineteenth century, as well as those which become reconfigured and/or re-emerged in new combinations.

Recent work in Native American history may offer an example of how to undertake this task of re-conceptualization. Early studies of Native American women were organized according to an Anglo-European model of gender. Assuming that a stable sexual opposition functioned independently as a primary signifier of power, these studies set out to assess the relative power of males and females. Most of the work focused on such subjects as the gender division of labor (was women's work important? did women control their own work? did their work bring them prestige and power within the community?) and/or the gender division of authority in community decision-making (did women speak in council? did women have ways of vetoing council decisions? Were women ever principal chiefs?). Related to this cluster of writings were two other streams of inquiry. One examined the roles of women as cultural mediators in early European-Native contacts. Less explicitly focused on a simple male-female contrast, these works nevertheless sought to highlight the important roles played by women in Native cultures. The other focused on cases where the Western male-female binary appeared to be unmoored from its corporeal basis, producing bodied males who performed "female" social roles, or bodied females who performed "male" social roles. Even this work maintained the Western model by describing the new identities in the terms of the Western binary: men/women and women/men.⁵⁴

Applying a modern Western category of gender certainly produced something recognizable to *Western* eyes,⁵⁵ but probably not much that pre-contact Native Americans would have found familiar. Newer work in the field has begun to modify both the categorical assumptions and the findings of the first studies, with particular attention to the character and status of the sexual binary. As Nancy Shoemaker points out in her essay "Categories," a

male/female binary certainly existed in Native American cultures, but it was not more salient than a host of other binaries, including war/peace, young/old, plant/animal and many others and probably was not separable from them. Under some circumstances, these lined up in ways reminiscent of the modern European model—for example, “peace” and “female” tended to have a close “conceptual association.” In fact, however, the field of signification they created was quite different from what the European model would predict. For example, Cherokees described the town of Chota as a “mother” town of “peace” and “refuge”—a cluster of traits that would immediately signal female domesticity and seclusion from political engagement in the modern European discourse. For the Cherokees, these qualities described “the capital center of Cherokee politics in the mid-18th century.”⁵⁶

This disruption of the Western binary also disrupts accompanying assumptions about the ways in which power is signified through gender. Not signaling female inferiority, the cluster “female/peace/refuge” also did not stably associate femaleness and vulnerability or powerlessness. The principal leaders who sat in council at Chota were males, the people they listened to were both males and females, old and young, and the power they held arose from their ability to demonstrate obedience to and respect for those people, not to dominate them.

Shoemaker’s work might well prompt a rethinking of the meaning of the sexual binary in Native cultures. Rather than anomalies to be somehow forced into an oppositional model by a rather mechanical reversal, we might want to consider figures of men/women and women/men as indications of the fluidity of the sexual binary—in its constant interplay with other binaries—as a signifier in Native cultures. That is to say, a “young/active/female/war” cluster might not mark merely an exception to a “young/active/male/cluster” or an additional gender, but might instead mark a different sort of category in which *gender is subordinate*—a warrior whose powers

transcend the body, for example, or whose power is made the more terrifying by the mingling of menstrual blood and the blood of battle.

Gunlög Fur makes a related argument in “‘Some Women are Wiser than Some Men’: Gender and Native American History.” Fur’s essay is at least in part directed toward historians of native America who reject gender in any form as useful category for analyzing Native American history, and she retains much of the modern language of gender, but with a critical distinction: she argues that maleness and femaleness worked very differently as fields of representation in Native than in European cultures, and she encourages us to look for salient bodied categories other than “male” and “female” in Native societies, to examine closely Native understandings of the relationships between corporeal bodies and the spirit world, and to be cautious about reading the apparent absence of females from accounts as a statement about status or instrumentality.⁵⁷ For Native cultures, “shape-shifting”—the ongoing and fluid mingling of categories—may prove a far more useful metaphor of identity than the narrower and more rigid location on a binary; a concept of power that embraces consensus, obedience, deference, silence and even invisibility may prove more useful than one limited to dominion and control.

The Native American case, then, points to understandings of social relations in which a male/female binary may be present and important, but not necessarily primary—one in which multiple other axes of identity frequently modify and sometimes entirely overwhelm the sexual binary, and in which the binary, even when present, cannot be reduced to the oppositionally sexed bodies that so dominate the modern Western model. Clearly some sort of category of gender was present in pre- and early contact Native American cultures, but equally clearly it was not the category of modern Western cultures.

That did not make it less significant. Among the most path-breaking insights to arise from new work on Native American history is the importance of Native concepts of gender in structuring and controlling early contacts with Europeans. In some respects echoing earlier work on Native women as cultural mediators, this work is a part of the more recent emphasis on a “middle ground”⁵⁸ of power between Native and European cultures, with attention to the role of gender. In Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands, for example, Juliana Barr argues that Native communities in the SouthWest borderlands were able to compel early Spanish arrivals to accept their kinship systems as principles of contact and trade.⁵⁹

Studies of gender in early African American history remain surprisingly scarce, given the robustness of research on the early slave trade or early slavery in the Americas generally. Moreover, most work on these subjects that takes account of gender either focuses on the gendered expectations of Europeans or assumes a Western model of gender for African Americans. An older literature examined gender divisions of labor in Africa and on Anglo-European plantations, commenting on which African practices American slave-owners continued and which they ignored. Jennifer Morgan’s Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery combines and enhances these two lines of inquiry by problematizing the distinctive gendered expectations of slave owners against women’s experiences in West Africa and assessing how those expectations shaped both the experiences of enslavement and the forms of women’s resistance.⁶⁰ Of the few other authors who have looked at the implications of persistence and change in gender practice in enslavement, one of the most interesting is James Sweet’s Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770 which argues that distinctively African sexualities and spiritual forms that had no

counterpart in European cultures became important in organizing not only African-African but also African-European relations in Brazilian society.⁶¹

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So let me return to Barbara Jeanne Fields, with a modest reframing of her critique. Fields complained that categories take on lives of their own. They don't really, of course; they take on the lives we give them. If the category "gender" has supplanted the historical subjects of our work, and so narrowed and (pre)determined our findings, it's because we have let it. I want to suggest that we quit letting it.

Accomplishing that goal is harder than setting it. As a concept and as a category of historical analysis, "gender" is a deeply Western-marked category. It's difficult to think how we push ourselves as historians—as intellectuals—away from the familiarity of those markings to make alternatives visible and analytically viable. We could throw out the language of gender altogether, and I have sometimes thought this might be the best course. But I'm not convinced that this would work—the language is too embedded in our common vocabulary, I suspect—and I'm not even sure that it's desirable. Our questions have to do with whether differences between the male and the female are salient and significant in a given society, and if so, to what effect and through what technologies. We need a language for designating that as a subject of investigation.

Retaining the language of "gender" exclusively to designate the set of relations encompassed in the current category (with other types of relations designated under some other rubric) also strikes me as unsatisfactory. Formally or implicitly dividing our studies into the "gendered" and the "non-gendered" not only reduces our work once again to a binary, but announces the Western concept of gender as the critical heart of our studies, in much the way that "postcolonial studies" risks keeping Western colonialism at the center of the conversation.

Moreover, as I have suggested, such a configuration would function to conceal the multiplicities within that supposedly unified Western category.⁶²

I'm also not inclined to believe that the answer to this particular problem lies in simply shifting from one all-encompassing paradigm to another—for example, from “gender” to “sexuality.” Terminology is important, but equally important is our willingness, *in a given historical study*, to interrogate that terminology, to ask why we are using a particular critical construct, what it means to us, from whose experience it derives and what it highlights and what it conceals in our work as historians. We need to problematize the way in which the category (any category) has been historically filled. In the absence of that critical deliberateness—which often occurs in only the most perfunctory way in historical studies of women/gender, especially as practiced in the United States and Europe—a new terminology would carry the same old limitations.

I think the first step toward achieving such deliberateness is to disinvest ourselves and our field from the claim that gender is a category of analysis at all, a claim originally made largely as a political statement about the importance of the field. In my view, this claim not only is *not* essential to our project, but actually hinders that work. What I am suggesting here is that we must decide just what history we want to write: the history of a particular definition of gender, treated as if it were abstract and universal, or the historically grounded histories of particular formations of gender seated within their cultures, various and altering over time (even within the modern period and even within Western culture). My preference for the latter, and the reasons for that preference, be clear by now.

Dispensing with the overarching category would encourage us to examine the complex fabric of processes and meanings that constitute a social or cultural history. We know that

“gender” never exists as a self-sufficient or self-realizing category. In the abstract, we know that there is no social subject whose continuing *sole* identity (experienced or attributed) is gender—or at least, that historians have yet to find evidence of such a subject. Although the complexity of social processes is seldom the main point of historical gender studies, in fact virtually all of the work on gender to date demonstrates that gender (an identity as male or female) is in constant and inseparable interplay with other manifestations of status and identity.⁶³ The tedious ever-presence of the triad “race, class and gender” in article and book titles and in course descriptions testifies the field’s awareness of the analytical limitations of distinct categories. is only the first step. It frees us to imagine a sparer and therefore roomier concept of “gender”—one which captures the essential elements of interest to us without predicating their relationships and meanings—but it doesn’t automatically do the imagining for us. That is the work of our work—our “labor of gender,” to use Najmabadi’s expression. That labor requires that we convert gender from a prescription to a series of questions, the first of which are: *were* male and female important social/cultural markers for the subjects for our work (individuals, communities, or events) and, if so, how were they structured, what valences did they carry, and how important were they?

We would do well not to assume a binary structure for gender but rather to let the binary emerge from our investigation, if it is present. One strategy here would be to follow the lead of anthropologists and ethnographers who have reframed the concept to permit the identification of “third,” “fourth,” “fifth” genders, and so on, recognizing a “man/woman” gender or a “woman/man” gender. Since this approach does not necessarily (or even usually) tie additional genders to reproductive body types (for example, the research on the institution of “berdache” among Natives Americans assumes male and female reproductive bodies),⁶⁴ it does offer an opportunity to loosen the association with bodies that haunts the concept “gender.” The

additional genders are generally intermediate combinations of the cultural male/female binary, however. Their addition makes that binary more complicated and less fixed, but does not fundamentally dislodge it.

Similarly, we might ask whether gender is primary in a given situation, rather than assuming that it is. In one moment or one era or one social setting gender may seem to rise to primacy as an expression of social position, but it is always gender as nested in, mingled with, and inseparable from the cluster of other factors socially relevant in a given culture. It is never “gender” alone. Deploying gender as a category of analysis disguises this process of reciprocal constitution and implies for gender an independent quasi-scientific causal status. I am reminded of Scott’s observation on “history’s disciplinary sense of the complexity of social causation.” “Instead of a search for single origins, we have to conceive of processes so interconnected that they cannot be disentangled.... In anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo’s formulation, we must pursue not universal, general causality but meaningful explanation.”⁶⁵ Gender is one set of historical relationships nested within a larger historical cluster of relationships from which it cannot, finally, be meaningfully disentangled.

This was the point of Elsa Barkley Brown’s wonderful 1992 essay, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics.” Brown criticized white feminists’ alarm at the efforts of black feminists to emphasize the important racial differences in their experience of gender, comparing that fear of diversity to the classical musician’s insistence on perfect order and control in the concert hall. In place of that classic politic, which Brown characterized as linear and silencing, she recommended the aesthetic of jazz—nonlinear ways of thinking about the world, of hearing multiple rhythms and thinking music not chaos, ways that challenge the notion that sufficient attention to diversity leads to

intellectual chaos, to political vacuum, or to intellectual and political void.”⁶⁶ Brown was arguing here, specifically, for a way of conceptualizing gender that could recognize its contingency and multiplicity: “Unfortunately,” she reflected, “it seems to me, few historians are good jazz musicians; most of us write as our training were in classic music. We require surrounding silence—or the audience, of all the instruments not singled out as the performers in this section, even often of any alternative visions of the composer’s. That then makes it particularly problematic for historians when faced with trying to understand difference while holding on to an old score that has in many ways assumed that despite race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other differences, at core all women do have the same gender.”⁶⁷ This was a political and an analytical position that Brown rejected: “we have still to recognize that being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman. . . . We still have to recognize that all women do not have the same gender.”⁶⁸

Many theories of intersectionality would retain gender as well as race as formal categories, but play them against each other deliberately to unfix their uniformity and coherence and to free the alternative possibilities currently silenced within them.⁶⁹ A related approach to transcending the tyranny of categorical binaries emerges in recent theories of “genderqueer-ness,” a concept meant to convey a rejection of gender *categorization* altogether. As the activist group FORGE puts it:

There are different modes of being genderqueer, and it is an evolving concept. Some believe they are a little of both or feel they have no gender at all. Others believe that gender is a social construct, and choose not to adhere to that construct. Some genderqueers do fit into the stereotypical gender roles expected of their sex, but still reject gender as a social construct. Still other people identify as genderqueer since, though they are

cisgendered [a neologism meaning "not transgender"], they do not fit many of society's expectations for the gender in which they identify."⁷⁰

The concept of genderqueer-ness pulls hard at the ties—even the cultural ties—of “gender” to bodies and invites historians to conceive “gender” as a subjectivity and/or attributed identity position or status expressive of traits sometimes associated with male and female bodies but without *necessary or presumptive* reference to those bodies for intelligibility.

For historians, the concept suggests a framework for not anticipating an association of, for example, “strength” with “male” or “masculinity,” or tenderness with “female” or “femininity” without evidence that these were the ways the specific culture under investigation understood those traits. Such a formulation permits us to recognize a boisterous, compliant, fashion-conscious bully as a gender formation without shoehorning the subject into a “female masculine” or male effeminate” category—a fluidity that would sure aid us in identifying and discussing earlier and non-Western gender formations historically. This would not prevent historians from identifying binary gender formations where they have historically occurred, but it would give us a tool for seeing other gender formations where they have historically occurred. It would encourage us to ask first *whether* a male/female distinction is important in social relationships in this place and this time. If it seems to be, then let us ask in what ways and with what recurrence and as parts of what other processes that distinction becomes important. Perhaps most important, until we can demonstrate connections and interactions, let us ask these questions very locally, and let us try to derive our answers from and about the people and societies we want to investigate.

I suspect these shifts in perspective and practice would have several immediate and ameliorative effects. In the first place, it would force us to explain what we mean when we use the term “gender”—the term that we claim animates the structures of power globally but which

we seem to find either too dull or too self-evident to warrant much discussion. We would require ourselves to ground the concept, as we were defining it, in place and time. Of course that would make us better historians. It might make us poorer intellectual imperialists and force us, as Dipesh Chakrabarty might put it, to provincialize gender as a category of analysis.⁷¹

Treating gender as a question of analysis would also encourage us to regard our sources more critically and more creatively—and more respectfully. When the framework of our findings is a foregone conclusion, the sources themselves become of minor importance, useful only for our ability to cull them for what we have already decided is present. That changes the moment we begin truly to interrogate, both our category and our sources—to ask whether what we are seeing is gender in the modern Western sense, or whether it constitutes some other formation...either an entirely distinctive formation, or a modern idiom gender in the process of being historically constituted, or a disposition of power that operates without important or stable references to a posited dimorphic body. Let us at least have to demonstrate, first to ourselves and then to our readers, that this is in fact the most persuasive reading of the evidence.

In this process we may perhaps begin to square off against our strongest enemy—and I suspect our best ally: ourselves. We need to become sharply more conscious of the historian as a figured self, and our field as a figured field. I agree with Elsa Barkley Brown that feminist historians have been loath to take that step, at least publicly, for fear of weakening the authority of our own truth claims. We seem to believe that if we allow for variation in the historical relations of maleness and femaleness we lose legitimacy to judge or intervene where those relations are vehicles of domination and subordination in the present. And so far we seem to have accorded that anxiety higher priority than the fear that, for many societies—for many women—we might be getting it wrong historically. . . which means, of course, that we may also be getting in wrong in

the present. I join Brown, then, in calling for a gender history that not only allows rifting, but recognizes the process of rifting as the very heart of the field.

NOTES

¹ Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Categories of Analysis? Not in My Book” in “Viewpoints: Excerpts from the ACLS Conference on the Humanities in the 1990s,” American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Papers Series, No. 10 (1989).

² Given the lingering controversy over the use of this term rather than “women,” to name the field, I want to be clear that my concerns do not arise from this ongoing shift in language. Certainly there are new challenges: the substitution of “gender” for what we once called “women’s” history. We do indeed still have a lot of recovery work to do on the history of women, but I don’t believe that using the term “gender” distracts us from that important task. Women’s worlds—at their most communal and institutional and at their most intimate, at their most fragile and at their most potent—have included men, and discourses of masculinity shape and inflect discourses of femininity. I think we do well to study both. Because I do, I do not worry one whit about shifting the name of the field, from women’s history to gender history, to reflect this relational perspective.

³ Obviously, we perceive evidence of our categories in our sources, but that perception is itself at least in part an act of constitution.

⁴ “Only by means of a break with the theoretical vision, which is experienced as a break with ordinary vision, can the observer take account, in his description of ritual practice, of the fact of participation (and consequently of his own separation from this)....” Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice (1990), p. 36. Nearly two decades ago, Sandra Harding called upon feminists to abandon fidelity to the notion of stable categories and to learn instead “to cherish certain kinds of intellectual, political, and psychic discomforts, to see as inappropriate and even self-defeating certain kinds of clear solutions to the problems we have been posing.” Sandra Harding, “The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Thought” in Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O’Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl and Mary Wyer, eds., Feminist Theory in Practice and Process (Chicago, 1989), p. 20.

⁵ In general, I agree with the genealogies of women’s and gender history provided by Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” The American Historical Review 91/5 (Dec., 1986), pp. 1056-61 and “Some More Reflections on Gender and Politics,” Gender and the Politics of History, rev. ed. (New York, 1999), esp. pp. 199-206, and Laura Lee Downs, Writing Gender History (New York, 2004), pp. 20-54.

⁶ See, for example, the classic women’s history anthologies Clio’s Consciousness Raised and Liberating Women’s History. Neither even uses the term “gender” in its introduction; in both collections, the term “gender” appears rarely in the essays. Mary S. Hartman and Lois W. Banner, eds, Clio’s Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women (New York, 1974) and Berenice A. Carroll, ed., Liberating Women’s History: Theoretical and Critical Essays (Urbana, 1976).

⁷ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., Toward an Anthropology of Women (New York, 1975), p. 165.

⁸ Classic work in this vein includes Joan Kelly's "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory: A Postscript to the 'Women and Power' Conference," Feminist Studies, 5/ 1 (Spring, 1979), pp. 216-227; Zillah R. Eisenstein, ed., Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism (1979); Annette and AnnMarie Wolpe, eds., Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production (1980).

⁹ This work began with the advent of feminism, but the 1980s saw the publication of a host of now-classic pieces, including: Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class (New York, 1981); bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism (Boston, 1981); Filomena Chioma Steady, ed., The Black Woman Cross-Culturally (Cambridge, MA, 1981); Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I a Woman? : Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York, 1985); Hazel V. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood : The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York, 1987); and Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," Signs 14/4, Common Grounds an Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity and Class in Women's Lives (Summer, 1989), pp. 745-773.

¹⁰ On standpoint theory, see Dorothy E. Smith, "A Sociology of Women" in Julia Sherman and Evelyn Beck, eds., The Prism of Sex (Madison, WI, 1979) and the later retrospective evaluation of standpoint theory in Signs 22/2 (Winter, 1997).

¹¹ Scott, "Gender," 1055.

¹² Ibid., pp. 1053 and 1055.

¹³ Ibid., p. 1055.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 1058-9.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 1060-1.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 1064.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 1055.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 1064.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.1067.

²⁰ The claim to universality was in fact fairly explicitly made: passing lightly over the possibilities that her own definition of gender might be historically and culturally specific, Scott asserted the “persistent and recurrent” primacy of gender “in Judeo-Christian as well as Islamic traditions”—a formulation that flattened both variety and change over time in both “traditions.” Ibid., p.1069.

²¹ Ibid., p.1067.

²² Ibid., p. 1069. The Bourdieu reference is to Le Sens Pratique (1980), 246-7, 333-461.

²³ Ibid., pp. 1067-69.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 1069.

²⁵ See also Joan W. Scott Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man (Cambridge, MA, 1996), “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity, Critical Inquiry, 27/2 (Winter, 2001), pp. 284-304, and Parité! : Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism (Chicago, 2005). Quotations are from Scott, “Reflections,” pp. 206, 202, 201-2, and 199, respectively.

²⁶ Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” African Gender Studies: A Reader, ed. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (New York, 2005), p. 11. See also Oyewùmí, The Invention of Woman: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (1997) and Bibi Bakare-Yusef, Edward Waswa Kisiang'ani, Desiree Lewis, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, and Filomena Chioma Steady, African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms (2004).

²⁷ Ibid. p 13.

²⁸ Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London, 1987).

²⁹ Barry S. Hewlett, Intimate Fathers: The Nature and Context of Aka Pygmy Paternal Infant Care (Ann Arbor, MI, 1991), p. 168. I am grateful to Hannah Nyala West for bringing this study to my attention.

³⁰ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Historical Analysis?" Journal of Women's History 18/1 (Spring 2006), pp. 14 and 11, delivered in abbreviated form as part of the panel "Beyond the Americas: Women, Borderlands and Frontiers across the Globe" at the 13th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Scripps College, 2–5 June 2005. See also Najmabadi, Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity (Berkeley, 2005).

³¹ Joyce Ladner, Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Women (New York, 1971). See also the excerpt from this work included in Carroll, ed., Liberating Women's History, pp. 179-193. Cf Carroll with Hartman and Banner, eds., Clio's Consciousness Raised (1974), which included no essays on women of color. See also Gerda Lerner's important anthology on Black women, Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York, 1972).

³² Cf Walter Johnson, "On Agency," Journal of Social History 37.1 (2003) 113-124.

³³ (Kathleen M. Brown's Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia, 1996, and Kirsten Fischer, Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina, 2001)

³⁴ Lisa Marguerite Tetrault, "The Memory of a Movement: Woman Suffrage and Reconstruction America, 1865-1890" (unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2004).

³⁵ Nan Enstad, Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (New York, 1999). See also George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York, 1994), especially the Introduction, pp. 1-29.

³⁶Carroll Smith Rosenberg “Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,” American Quarterly,” 23/4 (Oct., 1971), pp. 562-584; Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity (New Haven, 1973); and Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven, 1977).

³⁷ Kinda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, Daughters of Liberty: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 (Boston, 1980); and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750 (New York, 1982).

The quotation is from Ulrich, p. 240.

³⁸ Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” The Journal of American History 75/1 (June, 1988), pp. 9-39. Quotation p. 38.

³⁹ This was a conference of the Program in Early American Economy and Society of the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 1, 2004.

⁴⁰ I am indebted for some of these examples to my co-presenters and to the audience of “Historicizing Gender: A Roundtable,” Organization of American Historians Annual Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 31, 2007. The full panel included: Richard Godbeer, “Gender and Culture: A Multilayered Approach,” Kate Haulman, “Bodies and Minds in Early America,”

Jeanne Boydston, “Questioning Gender” and Rodney Hessinger, “Bringing it All Back Home: Masculinity, Femininity, and the Reintegration of Early American Gender.” See, for examples of work on these various aspects of colonial womanhood: Ulrich, Good Wives; Norton, Liberty’s Daughters; Kerber, Women of the Republic; Cornelia Hughes Dayton, “Turning Points and the Relevance of Colonial Legal History,” The William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Ser., 50/1 (Jan., 1993), pp. 7-17 and Women before the Bar: Gender, Law and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789 (Chapel Hill, 1995) ; Cynthia A. Kierner, Beyond the Household: Women’s Place in the Early South, 1700-1835 (Ithaca, 1998); Fischer, Suspect Relations; Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs; Sarah E. Fatherly, Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia (forthcoming, Lehigh University Press, 2008); and Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (1990).

⁴¹ Thomas Fuller, The Holy and the Profane State (1642) as quoted in Ulrich, Good Wives, p. 36.

⁴² Ulrich, Good Wives, p. 50.

⁴³ See Susan Branson, “Women and the Family Economy in the Early Republic: The Case of Elizabeth Meredith,” Journal of the Early Republic 16/1 (Spring, 1996), pp. 48; Elise Pinckney, ed., The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762 (Chapel Hill, 1972); Jeanne Boydston “Making Gender in the Early Republic,” in James P. P. Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic

⁴⁴ See for example Dayton, “Turning Points,” Kierner, Beyond the Household; Christine Leigh Heyrman, Southern Cross : The Beginnings of the Bible Belt (New York, 1997); Monica Nahar, Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America (forthcoming Oxford University Press 2007); Boydston, Home and Work.

⁴⁵ Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," The New England Quarterly 15/4 (December 1942), pp. 591-607.

⁴⁶ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York, 1988),

⁴⁷ For discussions of sexuality in Anglo culture in early American history see for example: Merrill D. Smith, ed. Sex and Sexuality in Early America (1998); Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, The Devil's Lane: Sex & Race in the Early South (2002); Richard Godbeer, Sexual Revolution in Early America (2004) and Lyons, Sex among the Rabble. See also the forum on sexuality in The William and Mary Quarterly 3rd Ser./LX (January 2003), especially the very interesting comments by Anne G. Myles, "Queering the Study of Early American Sexuality," pp. 199-202.

⁴⁸ Richard Godbeer, "'The Cry of Sodom': Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Ser./52 (1995): 259-86. The quotation is from Lyons, Sex among the Rabble, pp. 3.

⁴⁹ I am particularly indebted to Richard Godbeer for this point. See Godbeer, "Gender and Culture: A Multilayered Approach," "Historicizing Gender," OAH 2007.

⁵⁰ See Frederick Cooper's essay "modernity" in Colonialism in Question (Stanford, 2005), pp. 113-149.

⁵¹ For recent work on anxieties of racial purity in France and Britain, see for example Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of France': Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World." William and Mary Quarterly 61 (2004): 439-78. Gordon M. Sayre, "War, Captivity, Adoption and Torture," in Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature (1997), 248-304; Kathleen Wilson, "Britannia into Battle: Women,

War and Identities in England and America” in The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century (2002), pp. 92-128; Deborah Wyrick, “The Madwoman in the Hut: Scandals of Hybrid Domesticity in Early Victorian Literature from the West Indies.” Pacific Coast Philology 33/1 (1998): 44-57. See also Jennifer Spear’s important work on the use of the law to bolster sexual binaries in French Louisiana (Jennifer M. Spear, “Colonial Intimacies: Legislating Sex in French Louisiana,” The William and Mary Quarterly 60/1 (Jan., 2003), pp. 75-98).

⁵² See, for example, Alexander Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America (1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (1998); David Roediger, The Wage of Whiteness: Race and the Making of an American Working Class (1999); Kirsten Fischer, Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina; Kathleen M. Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia (1996); Jennifer L. Morgan, Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery (2004).

⁵³ See for example, Linda Kerber, Women of the Republic, Mary Beth Norton, Liberty’s Daughters, Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife.”

⁵⁴ See for examples Judith E. Brown, “Economic Organization and the Position of Women Among the Iroquois,” Ethnohistory 17 (1970): 151-167; Jaqueline Peterson, “Women Dreaming: The Religio-Psychology of Indian-White Marriage in the Western Great Lakes Fur Trade,” in Lillian Schlissel, ed., Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives (1986); Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women (1983); Sylvia Van Kirk, Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society (1983); Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin,

And Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade” Ethnohistory 47/2 (Spring, 2000): 423-452; Will Roscoe Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America (1998) and The Zuni Man-Woman (1991) and Sabine Lang, Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures (1998). An intermediate scholarship in the 1990s continued to examine Native women as a distinct group, but emphasizing that gender among natives was more flexible than among Europeans and that maleness and femaleness did not necessarily signify superiority and subjection. See, for example, Karen Anderson, Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France (1993); Theda Perdue, Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835 (1999).

⁵⁵ I am obviously indebted to Chandra Talhade Mohanty for this phrasing. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Feminist Review, 30 (Autumn 1988).

⁵⁶ Nancy Shoemaker, "Categories" in Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Cultures, edited by Nancy Shoemaker (2002), pp. 51-74. See especially page 59.

⁵⁷ Nancy Shoemaker, "Categories" and Gunlög Fur "'Some Women are Wiser than Some Men': Gender and Native American History" in Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Cultures, edited by Nancy Shoemaker (2002), pp. 51-74 and 75-106.

⁵⁸ See Richard White, The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 (1991).

⁵⁹ Juliana Barr, Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands (2007).

⁶⁰ Morgan, Laboring Women.

⁶¹ James H. Sweet, Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770 (2006). More common in its approach is Laurent Dubois's A Colony of

Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804, which does touch on issues of gender but within a largely Western framework (which may have been appropriate by the late eighteenth century). For other works examining the general effects of contact see also Michael A. Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South (1998) and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links (2006).

⁶² Although I'm not ready to abandon the language of gender, I recognize that forty years into the life of the field, any retention of that language may hint at this kind of privileging of the West.

⁶³ For a very useful overview of theories of intersectionality, see Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 30/3 (2005):1771-1800.

⁶⁴ See for example, Roscoe Changing Ones and Lang, Men as Women, Women as Men.

⁶⁵ Scott, "Gender as a Category," pp. 1055 and 1067.

⁶⁶ Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics." Feminist Studies 18/2 (1992), pp. 296-7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁶⁹ For a very useful overview of theories of intersectionality, see Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 30/3 (2005):1771-1800.

⁷⁰ FORGE (For Ourselves Reworking Society's Expectations) Website. [Http://www.forge-forward.org/index.php](http://www.forge-forward.org/index.php). Milwaukee, Wisconsin. See also Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, eds., GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary (2002).

⁷¹ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference (2000).